Homily for 5th Sunday 2015
February 8, 2015
Readings: Job 7.1-7, Ps. 147, 1 Cor. 9.16-23, Mk. 1.29-39
Place: St. Mary’s, Opelika, AL
Theme: Making sense of suffering

Everybody in this church has suffered, yes? … For most of us, our sufferings have run the gamut. We have experienced all kinds of sufferings: physical, …, emotional, … mental, … spiritual, … relational,… or financial. I think almost everybody could write a book about his or her sufferings. As a priest, once I think I have heard it all, I hear something else that I had never imagined. Truth is stranger than fiction.

All of today’s readings speak about suffering. Job writes, “Man’s life on earth is drudgery. He is like a slave who longs for the shade.” Job complains that he can’t sleep at night: “I am filled with restlessness until the dawn.” Job laments, “I shall not see happiness again.” Job was having a very bad day! The Responsorial Psalm proclaims some very encouraging words, “Praise the Lord, who heals the brokenhearted,” … “His wisdom knows no bounds.” St. Paul boasts about his sufferings, “I have made myself a slave to all people in order to win over [to Christ] as many [people] as possible. In the gospel, Jesus healed Simon Peter’s mother-in-law. And that evening, “after sunset, they brought to [Jesus] all who were ill or were possessed by demons.” Jesus healed them all of their physical and spiritual maladies.

You and I know many people who suffer physically and spiritually. … Let’s just say a quiet prayer for them now. … Jesus healed many people in his day and he continues to heal people throughout history. Every saint needs to have miracles verified as done in his name. For the last thousand years, four miracles were required. Since Vatican Council II, only two miracles are required. Mother Teresa’s miracles consisted of …… Pope John Paul II’s miracles included … By the way, for the Church officially to accept miracles they must be physical not moral, occurring overnight not over some weeks, with no medical intervention and no medical explanation.

Sufferings happen, and miracles happen. The latter is extraordinary. Suffering, however, is universal and commonplace. May I suggest four steps how to deal with suffering, and in the process to draw closer to Jesus Christ. We all say that we want to follow Christ, to identify with him, and to become more like him. I know of no better way to identify with and become more like Christ than through suffering. Everybody, privately, can you think of one suffering you experience currently? … First step. Face it. Don’t ignore it, or deny it. Your suffering is real, yes? Second step. Feel it. Feel the suffering. It hurts. Your heart, or head or body aches from this suffering. Feeling this suffering might bring you to tears. Third step. In your suffering, identify with Jesus’ sufferings. Look at him along the Way of the Cross, or on the Cross. Think of his physical pain, his emotional anguish, his spiritual suffering when he cried, “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me? Bring your suffering to Jesus. Share it with him. Share it with Mary, to whom the Psalm is applied, “Whose sorrow is like unto my sorrow?” These first three steps are helpful, but they won’t rid you of your pain until you perform the fourth step. Fourth step is, transcend your suffering by reaching out beyond yourself to help others who are suffering.
I know a middle-aged couple whose son graduated from West Point Military Academy, was assigned to Iraq, called his mother on Mother’s Day, and was killed one week later. This mother and father have dealt with their sorrow by becoming very involved in Wounded Warriors’ program which organizes fundraising events such as an annual golf tournament to purchase equipment for the wounded soldiers. I know a middle-aged mother whose son became addicted to drugs, and now sits in prison. She studied and became a drug counselor in order to better understand her son, and to guide other young people away from this misbehavior. Personally, while working in a parish in Brooklyn, New York, I was mugged five times. One of those times I was robbed at gunpoint. Thanks be to God and his Blessed Mother and my Guardian Angel, when the muggers discovered I had no money, they ran away. But inside, I was hurt. For five years, I could not get rid of my anger from my suffering. Nothing worked until I prayed for the men who had attacked me. By reaching out beyond my hurt feelings, and praying for my attackers, I transcended my hurt, and my hurt began to evaporate.

I will conclude with this example. Imagine a human heart such as we will see depicted on Valentine’s Day. The heart is intact, whole. When the heart gets broken, the heart becomes opened. Without ever desiring suffering, the more our hearts are broken, the more they become opened. The more they become opened, the more we become like Jesus Christ, whose heart was opened to save all peoples from all times and places. A word to the wise. Suffering is inevitable and universal. Nobody escapes suffering. Turn your suffering into a positive experience by identifying through suffering with Jesus, and by transcending your suffering by reaching out and doing good for others. Even in the midst of suffering, we will be able to be joyful. And we will rejoice with the Psalmist, who today teaches us to say, “Praise the Lord, who heals the broken-hearted.”