Sunday, October 15, 1972
DO YOU WANT TO BE HEALED?
John 5:1-9 (8, 1, 23, 66)

A friend of mine went to a physician for treatment of an ailment that had bothered him for many years. After talking with the patient for a few minutes, the doctor asked, “Do you want to be helped?”

“Do you want to be healed?” This can sound like a curious and even callous question. Yet it reminds us of Jesus of Nazareth. One day, as reported in our scripture lesson this morning, Jesus encountered a crippled man who had been laying by a special pool of water for many years, always hoping to be able to get into the water and be cured.

The belief about this particular pool of water was that when it bubbled up at certain intervals, the first person to get into the pool would be healed of his or her in-firmity. Thus, all around the pool there were people waiting, some on cots or pallets, others sitting, or on crutches. The man Jesus encountered was one of the many who were waiting at the pool, only this person had been there for many years.

He had to make his living begging for food. He couldn’t work. And supposedly, every day he had tried when the pool began to bubble to get himself down the steps into the pool so that perhaps he could be healed. But he never quite made it. And once more he had to crawl back to the too-familiar place where he had lain so long.

And now Jesus stood and looked down at him and asked “Do you want to be healed?” We can suppose that the man might’ve wanted to shout back in anger— “What a silly question!”

But before we let our sympathy run away with us in favor of the invalid, we need to take this question of Jesus very seriously. “Do you want to be healed?” It’s not a silly question at all. It’s not as cruel or heartless or callous as it at first sounds. It’s the most basic questions of all, a question we have to ask ourselves time and time again.

It’s another way of asking, “Do you want to change?” “Do you want help?” It’s also a way of asking the deeper question, “How do you look on your illness, your weakness, your suffering, your problems. How does it affect your attitude toward life?”

The question of Jesus directed attention not to the man’s illness, but rather to his outlook, his will, his desire, his intention. Whereas the invalid complained in terms of the help which others never gave him, Jesus put the stress on his own attitude about himself. Concerned for so long with how others could help him and didn’t, the invalid had overlooked how he might help himself.

Do you want to be healed? The crippled man’s disease, or whatever it was, can stand for any problem or illness, or weakness or pains that we ourselves have. And the point is that the crippled man by the pool was not at all sure up to this point whether or not he wanted to be healed. Jesus knew that! Do you want to be healed or do you just want someone to listen to your complaint?

The fact is that some of us unconsciously need our i1l-nesses, our weaknesses, our problems, our pains; at least we think we need them. We don’t want anything really changed. We just

want someone to know how bad things are. Illness itself is not without its compensations. Some actually do not want to be healed.

Paul Tournier, a physician, writes of a patient of his who said to him quite frankly one day, “I have to tell you that I am afraid of feeling myself becoming normal. I feel that everyone is going to be taking advantage of me, treating me unkindly. . . I am def ending myself in advance.”

And so it is, our various kinds of illnesses, weaknesses, pains, and headaches serve us in many ways. They give us all kinds of excuses. This is not to say they are not real. The problem is that we are not at all sure deep down if we want to be completely free of them. We’re not sure if we really want help if we want to change.

Thus, it is quite possible that the crippled man by the pool had settled into a fairly interesting and perhaps even profitable vocation, the vocation of illness in which he was the recipient of considerable sympathy and attention.

It was not totally unpleasant to lie there in the coolness of the shade while other people had to work and perspire in the heat and glare of the sun. Perhaps this man used his illness as an escape from the responsibilities of life. Oh, to be sure each day he usually made some effort to get into the pool that he might be helped. But he always conveniently blamed his not being able to get in the pool on indicates conflict those around him. It indicates a conflict within him. Part of him undoubtedly wanted to be healed, but the stronger part of him, until he met Jesus, wanted only to remain as he was, unchanged!

I once knew a man who was thoroughly enjoying a kind of self-assigned task of research in a public library as a result of the fact that a fear of crossing any street made gainful employment apparently impossible. He resented, strongly, any efforts at resolving his problem (and of course compelling him to go to work). His answer to the question which Jesus asked, “Do you want to be healed?” at least unconsciously was, “No, I don’t want to be healed.”

The fact of the matter was that he had lost the courage to handle his life and so had retreated into i11ness. He was defeated by life. He needed help in daring to believe that he could find meaning by facing life, by doing without his illness, rather than by withdrawing from active involve-ment into passive illness.

Last Wednesday’s Wall Street Journal carried a story about “professional patients” in hospitals, persons who aren’t really sick, yet who fake illness in order to gain admit-tance to a hospital and then still don’t want to be helped. It’s called “Munchausen’s Syndrome.” They feel compelled to feign illness yet are antagonistic to the doctors and nurses they’ve tricked into treating them. They demand constant attention, often throwing tantrums and sometimes even slashing a vein or two to make themselves the center of attention.

One doctor said, “I’d be willing to bet that lawyers, social agencies and even the churches have their Munchausen’s people too.”

Do you want to be healed? Do you want to be helped to handle your illness, or weakness or problem so that it is no longer an excuse? Do you want to be changed? This is the question which Jesus asks all of us.

We do not have to be crippled in a physical sense as was the man Jesus dealt with. Some of us may be crippled in other ways. Some avoid deep personal relationships because they have

been hurt in the past. Some of us just don't want to get involved. So, we make excuses. We say that we do not have the personality for meeting people; we are crippled in that sense. Or we may find some other impediment. Every time someone comes with whom we might have to get personally involved with, we get a severe headache, or some other ailment or attack. We may not want to be healed or changed. Our illness, our weakness, whatever it may be, provides us with the convenient excuse that we need, and we cover up the more basic problem.

The fact is if we know how to read the signs, our illnesses often tell us a lot more about ourselves than our health. A person with an "aching back" may literally feel that he is carrying the problems of the world on his or her back.

From the earliest times, human beings have known that the body speaks a very basic and honest language through the healthy and unhealthy functioning of our organs. Our ex- pressive gestures. the way we carry ourselves. the color of our skin and the behavior of our heart, lungs and many other parts of our body spell out our situation. The body is the expression of the soul. Thus, our illnesses in particular tell us a great deal about ourselves if we will listen to them.

Time and time again in my own case, self-examination has shown me that a sudden feeling of fatigue, a headache, or an attack of indigestion is really a trick played on me by my inner self. A difficulty or disappointment had interrupted the smooth flow of my work; a difficult letter to write, a puzzling problem to unravel, or a disagreeable task to be undertaken had held me up and so my unconscious was furnishing me with a good excuse for postponing it.

Dr. Tournier points out that all chronic disturbances may be seen to involve a kind of secret flight into disease. This again is not to say that the disease is therefore imaginary. To the contrary, it is all too real. But the point is we may not want to be healed.

Furthermore, our chronic complaints or problems or pains are also sometimes used without our knowing it, as a means of obtaining attention that cannot otherwise be easily gained. When persons search honestly among their childhood memories for the first manifestation of their functional disorders, a fair number of such persons remember tl1a.t 5. their parents who normally gave little sign of their affection, would make a tremendous fuss over them the moment they were ill. The result was that in some cases illness soon seemed more pleasant than good health, and they half-consciously emphasized their smallest complaints in order to obtain those marks of attention and affection thirsted for. In some cases, illness could ho1d back their parents' strict rules and give them a chance to avoid lessons, visits, and formalities that were other-wise forced upon them.

So, it is with us adults. We unconsciously know that ill-ness will bring attention. In illness we are the center of attention. One woman recently wrote: "As soon as one gets inside the hospital, one's state of mind changes. Without suspecting it, one assumes that one is the center of everything, of the whole world. It is MY accident, MY doctors, MY nurse, MY injections, MY meals, MY digestion, MY thermometer. In this way, everything gradually becomes exclusive and of the first importance. Then it is MY case, unique of its kind, MY scar, and soon everything revolves around the possession which events have made mine and I become something really interesting. MY visitors finally make me believe it."

And some persons discover that they can control others with their illness or weakness. "Children be quiet, you know your mother has a headache!"

Do you want to be healed? It's a fair question. Do you want to change? We may not be so sure. We're not always sure because our illnesses, our pains, our chronic com-plaints, our habits, or old way of doing things, can often be used by us in an attempt to solve or avoid a problem or to fill some basic need or avoid responsibility.

Is there a way out? There is, but it involves a risk, a leap to a new kind of place. To be healed is to accept another change of place. It is scarcely less difficult to leave illness than to enter it; it is sometimes much harder. To get well is to lose the protection, care, and support which one received as a sick person. To get well is once more to face responsibilities, risks, and disappointments from which one has been excused by illness.

But God calls us to health, to wholeness·. Jesus gave the crippled man a new kind of support, so he no longer needed the crutch of his illness to exist in the world. God is a force that a person can encounter, and which can oblige a person to let go of that which he would not or could not let go. It is a force outside himself. It is an opening on to a new dimension of life, in which one relies on the power of God more than on one's own efforts.

This letting go of an illness, a weakness, a crutch, or a habit can bring in turn a new fulfillment. Before the renunciation, we see only what we have to let go; a grudge, security, a possession, a child who has become an adult, or who is getting married, an unsatisfied desire, a disappointed ambition, some little thing we are passionately fond of; or perhaps a jealousy, an impossible or guilty love. It's not easy to let go. Yet God calls us onward to a new place. It can be like making a great leap in the dark.

Life and faith always insist on moving forward; and I cannot move forward without leaving something behind.

It is not that we have to forget the past, or even less to disown it, but to use it as a springboard for a leap forward towards new experiences. There are so many people who live only on memories! They turn their houses into museums; they are prisoners of a past or an illness or a weakness or a habit of which they cannot let go.

Do you want to be healed? Jesus still wants to lead us out. The kind of healing God offers is open to all of us. Amen.