Sunday, February 4, 1979
WHY IS NOT ALWAYS THE BEST QUESTION
John 5:2-9

There are people who spend most of their time being professional victims. If they are ill and do not get well, it's because the physicians are incompetent or because they feel neglected by the people around them. If they have trouble getting along with other people, it's because their parents made such a mess of their childhood, or because everyone is against them. Whatever trouble comes their way, it's always someone else's fault. If nothing good ever happens to them, it's because people around them don't give them a chance. If they are depressed, it's because of the terrible state of the world or because someone they love hat let them down. If one of these professional victims is an alcoholic, it's because he or she has a spouse who doesn't understand them.

The professional victim is always trying to justify himself or herself. He or she continually looks for reasons outside himself in order to excuse his or her behavior or failure. If a person is a victim, then that person is innocent and has to accept no responsibility for his or her behavior or condition. It's always someone else's fault.

The crippled man Jesus met one day at the pool of Bethzatha, was a professional victim. He had been ill for 38 years and had been lying by the side of the pool for many of these years. When Jesus met him and discovered that he had been there for a long time, Jesus did not ask, "Why haven't you been healed, or why are you sick," — Those were not the best questions. Rather Jesus asked a much more direct and relevant question — "Do you vi1ant to be healed?"

The crippled man didn't hear that question at first, or if he heard it, he ignored it. He answered Jesus as if he had been asked "why" he was still sick. He began to give excuses for his problems. He said that there was no one around to help him down into the pool when the water began to bubble — someone else always got there before him. The belief was that when the pool began to bubble, the first person who got into the water would be healed. The crippled man was saying to Jesus that he was the victim of the neglect of others.

The Gospel according to John does not give us the whole conversation between Jesus and this man, but we do know that Jesus said to him in effect, "Get off it. Forget the excuses. I didn't ask you why you were still sick. I asked you, do you want to be healed? It's time you stopped making excuses and blaming the neglect of others for your condition. It doesn't accomplish anything. It's only an attempt to justify your present condition. Why is not always the best question."

Think of it! Don't many of our problems large and small stem from the fact that we have a victim mentality? We may claim that we are victims of our terrible parents and the mistakes they made in raising us. We might blame the environment in which we grew up. We might even blame our toilet training.

But we forget that our lives are not wholly conditioned or dictated by how our parents treated us, or how our friends responded to us, or the environment in which we were raised. As human beings, we are free under God to be the persons God meant us to be. To be sure we all have limits. And we can give over our freedom to anyone or anything. We can continue to blame the past or the events of the present for our condition. We can sell out and come to believe that

every part of our life is controlled by events beyond our control. But then we are merely a puppet with someone else pulling the strings, or we are like a rubber ball which someone else is always bouncing.

We all know people who play the victim role very well and each one of us plays it at times. We are the victims of our families. Our spouse won't listen to us and doesn't understand us. Our children won't listen and cause us all sorts of problems. Our boss is mean. Our job is terrible. The whole world is bad. "Poor me," can be a continual theme.

How then are we to respond to people with the victim mentality? How do we handle ourselves when we are in this state of mind? If we simply and only agree with the victim, we may not be helping at all. How can we love and care for and support the victim part of others or our-selves in a healthy way?

1. First, remember when you meet the victim mentality — why is not always the best question! The "why" question or the answer does not solve the immediate problem. Suppose your son or daughter comes home and reports that he or she had an auto accident with your new car. "Why did you drive so carelessly?" you ask. How does that question or answer help at that point? What you have to deal with then is the fact of the accident. "Was anyone hurt?" "Are you all right?" "Can the car be fixed?"

As I was writing this sermon a man came into my office seeking help. He had just moved his wife and four children from Des Moines to Lincoln and had no place to live. He was trying to find a house to rent. He had no money for the first month's rent or the deposit required. I wanted to ask, "Why did you move to Lincoln if you had no place to live?" But that question and the answer to it would've been of little help in solving the immediate problem at hand. It would've given him a chance to justify himself and his decision to come to Lincoln. But the immediate problem was to find a suitable place to house the family. The why questions could be asked later if necessary.

A child spills a glass of milk at the dinner table and the parent quickly asks, "Why are you so clumsy?" How does that question deal with the situation? Rather the parent might ask, "What are you going to do about that spilled milk," or "How do you propose to clean up the milk that has been spilled?"

Or suppose a person comes to see me and that person is very depressed, it's not much help to anyone to ask -- "Why are you depressed?" The person probably doesn't truly know and the question of why could lead us down the wrong trail. In an attempt to answer the question of why, we might settle on a reason which is not the reason at all. Why is not always the best question.

2. Secondly when we're dealing with ourselves or others who have the victim mentality, we need to be aware that behind all the confusion, we human beings often are trying our best to justify ourselves. We want to prove that there's really nothing wrong with us, but that we are a victim of all those unloving and uncaring people.

But Jesus Christ said that the only way we can claim forgiveness and start fresh in life is when we confess where we are wrong. If we try to see ourselves or others only as a victim., then we may miss our own wrongdoing. Each one of us needs responsible guilt! In other words, each one of us needs to take responsibility for our own actions in any given situation or our own lack of action.

To be sure the lame man by the side of the pool did not cause his illness, but if he wanted to be well, he had to quit blaming others for his condition and take some responsibility for getting well. Up to this point he was only feeling sorry for himself and putting all the blame for his condition on the neglect of the others around him. That's why Jesus did not ask him, "Why are you sick," but, "Do you want to be healed?" and if so, "What are you willing to do about it?"

Most people, including ourselves, want sympathy rather than to assume responsible guilt. Thus, we need to ask ourselves and others, "What are you going to do about it? How are you going to change it?" instead of "Why are you that way?" Once we quit always having to be innocent and can begin to be responsibly guilty, life has a way of opening up and flowing.

Unfortunately, some of us sometimes switch to the extreme and become irresponsibly guilty. There are those who blame all the troubles of the world on themselves; anything that goes wrong becomes their fault and their fault alone — that is irresponsible guilt!

However, when individuals, ourselves and others, begin to accept proper responsibility for our actions and begin to do something about our condition and behavior, then we also begin to build self-esteem and no longer need to be always justifying ourselves falsely. One of the most fundamental needs is for people to be able to feel good about themselves.

When people have a healthy sense of self-esteem they can bounce back more easily from a defeat, meet other people without excessive shyness, risk doing some new things, leave themselves open to novelty and change, feel comfortable in most social situations, and are able to work at changing their lives in the direction they most want to go. Most of all, people with a healthy sense of self-esteem are able to make up their minds. They listen to others, but when they have to make a decision, they are able to do it.

We can help others gain self-esteem if instead of always asking "why," we ask if they are willing to do something about their problems and also indicate that we are willing to help them work at their problems.

3. Thirdly we can be of help to ourselves and others when we are possessed by the victim mentality, if instead of asking why, we begin to question some of the old cliches and attitudes which are a part of us and all around us.

Jesus Christ didn't accept the answer the lame m.an gave him as his reason for not being healed. Jesus knew how often people are always mouthing the words and thoughts of others so that we think of them as being our own and come to believe them without question.

One day I was talking with an eleven-year-old girl: a bright, sensitive person, an excellent pupil in her class at school. We were talking about teachers, good ones, bad ones, indifferent ones, and I asked her what she thought made a good teacher. She said a teacher should be intelligent, exciting, interesting, should like children and be nice, but not too nice. When I asked her what "too nice" meant, she said, "Well, if a teacher is too nice, you take advantage of her." From what I knew of this eleven-year-old girl, it was hard to believe that she could take advantage of anyone, so I said, "Come on, when have you ever taken advantage of a nice teacher?" She thought about it and in a moment, it was clear that she never had. She had simply repeated something she had heard many times without questioning it, and yet it was completely foreign to her own knowledge and experience. And she was accepting it as being true. She had no personal experience of an attitude that she put forth as her own belief.

This might seem like a trivial incident, but it illustrates an important point. Often all of us repeat statements and come to accept them as true without ever questioning them. In so doing, we may be of little help to others or ourselves. Most of us probably learned to overuse the question of “why” without ever questioning its helpfulness. So, this morning consider this — “Why may not always be the best question!”

The Gospel of Jesus Christ as revealed in this story of the man by pool of Bethzatha, tells us that we need not be victims always trying to justify our innocence, always having to explain why we are a certain way. We can accept responsible guilt and then go on to take whatever action necessary to change our behavior. We can also help others do the same. Amen.