Sunday, March 6, 1988
THE IMPORTANT QUESTION
John 5:1-9

"Do you want to be healed?" To a man who had been ill for 38 years, this must have sounded like an impertinent and superfluous question. Yet that's the question that Jesus asked him. Impertinent or not, it was the most important question that had ever been asked of this sick individual. Do you want to be healed?

There are people who spend most of their time being professional victims. We sometimes call them hypochondriacs. 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.

No matter what their problem is, it's always someone else's fault. 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. 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 the world is no good, or because someone they love and depended on has let them down.

The professional victim is always trying to find a reason outside themselves to excuse their failure or behavior. I asked a person one day why he drank so much, and he said it was because his wife nagged him. I asked his wife why she nagged him so much, and she said it was because he was always drinking.

The man who had been ill for 38 years whom Jesus met one day by the pool of Bethzatha was, I believe, a professional victim.

So when Jesus asked him, "Do you want to be healed?" he did not directly answer that question. Instead, he answered Jesus as if he had been asked, "Why are you still sick?" That is, he began to give excuses for his problem. 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. He saw himself as the victim of the neglect of others.

The Gospel of John does not give us the whole conversation between Jesus and this sick man. These healing stories never do. Instead, we get very condensed versions of what happened. We can imagine, however, that Jesus said to the man, "Get off it. Forget the excuses. I didn't ask you why you had never been healed. I asked you, 'Do you want to be healed?' It's time you stopped making excuses and blaming the neglect of others for your continued illness. That doesn't accomplish anything. It's only an attempt to justify your present condition. Why you are still sick is not the question I asked. I want to know, 'Do you want to be healed?'"

Do you want to be healed? That's the important question. It's not a silly question at all. It's not as impertinent or callous as it might sound at first. It's another way of asking, "Do you want to change?" The fact is that some people do not want to be healed. Dr. Bernie Siegel, in his best-selling book, Love, Medicine, and Miracles, says, "Patients vary enormously. Some will do almost anything rather than alter their lives to increase their chances for a cure. At the other extreme are those he calls 'exceptional patients, or survivors.' They refuse to participate in defeat."

Dr. Siegel tells about a physician who had overcome tuberculosis as a young man. He had been told that he would be in a sanitarium for two years. But he said, “No, I’ll be home for Christmas with my family.” And in fact, in six months, on December 23, he was discharged.

Much later in life, however, this same doctor was admitted to the hospital in good physical condition and was in good humor. When he learned his diagnosis was cancer, however, he became terribly depressed and withdrawn, and in two weeks, he was dead. His wife thanked Dr. Siegel for his efforts and explained that her husband hadn’t wanted to fight for recovery because his life and work had lost all meaning. He didn’t want to be healed.

In his book, Anatomy of an Illness, Norman Cousins writes about his experience with suspected tuberculosis.

“My first experience in coping with a bleak medical diagnosis came at the age of ten, when I was sent to a tuberculosis sanitarium. I was terribly frail and underweight, and it seemed logical to suppose that I was in the grip of a serious malady.

What was most interesting to me about that early experience was that patients divided themselves into two groups: those who were confident that they would beat back the disease and be able to resume normal lives, and those who resigned themselves to a prolonged and even fatal illness. Those of us who held to the optimistic view became good friends, involved ourselves in creative activities, and had little to do with the patients who had resigned themselves to the worst. When newcomers arrived at the hospital, we did our best to recruit them before the bleak brigade went to work.

I couldn’t help being impressed with the fact that the boys in my group had a far higher percentage of ‘discharged as cured’ outcomes than the kids in the other group. Even at the age of ten, I was being philosophically conditioned; I became aware of the power of the mind in overcoming disease. The lessons I learned about hope at that time played an important part in my complete recovery and in the feelings I have had since about the preciousness of life.”

“Do you want to be healed?” This question, which Jesus asked the man who had been ill for 38 years, was directed not to the man’s illness, but rather to his outlook, his will, his desire, his intentions. Whereas the invalid complained in terms of the help which others never gave him, Jesus put the stress on his own attitude about himself and his illness. This man had no doubt never been asked that question before.

Do you want to be healed? This man’s illness, whatever it was (The Gospel of John doesn’t tell us), can stand for any problem, illness, weakness, or pain that we ourselves might have. Do you want to be healed? Or do you simply want someone to listen to your complaints?

The fact is that some of us seem to need our illnesses, our problems, our weaknesses, our pains. At least we think we need them. As I said two weeks ago — some people seek refuge in illness. We don’t want to change. Illness itself is not without its compensations.

Paul Tournier, a physician, writes about a patient 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 defending myself in advance.”

And so it is, our various kinds of illness, weaknesses, pains, and headaches serve us in many ways. They give us all kinds of excuses. They get us sympathy. They get us attention. 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.

It is quite possible that the sick man by the pool had settled into a fairly interesting vocation of illness in which he was the recipient of considerable sympathy and attention.

Perhaps this man used his illness as an escape from the responsibilities of life. Oh, to be sure, he made some little effort each day to get into the pool that he might be helped. But he always conveniently blamed his not being able to get into the pool in time on 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. That was the easy way out.

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 impossible. He resented strongly any efforts at resolving his problem (and, of course, making it possible for him to get a job). His answer to the question which Jesus asked, “Do you want to be healed?” at least subconsciously was, “No, I do not 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 illness. 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.

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

Many of us learned when we were little children how useful illness can be. When people search honestly among their childhood memories for the first manifestations of their functional disorders, a fair number of such people remember that 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 self-consciously emphasized their smallest complaints in order to obtain those marks of attention and affection which they thirsted for. In some cases, illness could hold back their parent’s strict rules and give them a chance to avoid lessons, visits, and formalities that were otherwise forced on them.

So it is with us adults. We know deep down that illness will bring attention. In illness, we are the center of attention. One woman 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. It is MY accident, MY doctors, MY nurses, 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 have become something really interesting. MY visitors finally make me believe it.”

And some individuals quickly discover that they can control others with their illness. “Children, be quiet. Your mother has a headache.”

Do you want to be healed? It’s the important question. And it’s a fair question. Do you want to change? We’re not always sure because our illnesses, our pains, our chronic complaints, our habits, our old way of doing things can often be used by us in an attempt to solve or avoid a problem, to fill some basic need in an unhealthy way, or to avoid responsibility.

Is there a way out? Jesus said to the man, “Rise, take up your pallet, and walk.” To get well is to lose the protection, care, and support which one receives as a sick person. But to get well is to be free.

God calls us to wholeness, health. God sees us as whole and accepts us as whole, and that’s the way we are to see ourselves.

When the Reverend Dr. Harold Wilke was here a few weeks ago, a woman asked him in a public meeting that we had here at the Church whether or not he believed that in the life after this life, he would have arms and be whole. And he replied, “I believe that God sees me as whole right now. The fact that I do not have any arms does not make me any less whole or any less healthy in God’s view or God’s acceptance of me.”

Jesus said to the man by the pool who had been there as a sick person for 38 years, “Rise, take up your pallet, and walk. You are already whole in God’s sight.” And that’s God’s Good News for each one of us. Amen.