Sunday, February 14, 1993
OVERCOMING THE VICTIM MENTALITY
John 5:1-9

His name is Ocie McClure. He's a man for our times. You might have read about him a few years ago in the newspapers. He's a victim — a victim of circumstances or bad luck. Ocie was walking along a street in San Francisco, minding his own business. Well, not entirely minding his own business, since his business is stealing.

Anyway, he was tending to business. He saw a woman carrying a purse and decided to acquire that purse — a sort of hostile takeover. The woman resisted his takeover attempt, so Ocie, who is 24 and a muscular 210 pounds, knocked her down and gave her a few kicks. The takeover was completed quickly, and purse in hand, Ocie took off running.

Some people can't mind their own business. In this instance, it was a taxi driver who saw the whole thing. He radioed an alert and followed Ocie. Ocie's foot speed was no match for the cabbie's gas pedal, and he soon had Ocie cornered. "I told him to halt," said the cab driver, "and I saw him reaching for something. I thought it was a weapon."

As it turns out, he wasn't reaching for a weapon, but the cabbie used his car to pin Ocie against a wall, breaking one of his legs.

The police came and took Ocie to a hospital. They took the purse's owner to a hospital too, since she was banged up pretty badly. A judge sentenced Ocie to eight years in prison.

But Ocie isn't the kind of guy to sit there and let himself be a victim. He's fighting back in the true American way. He's suing. He got a lawyer to file a suit against the cab driver and the cab company on the allegation that the cab driver used excessive force in catching him. And he wants five million dollars in damages because his leg still hurts and he can't run as well as he used to.

The case hasn't come to trial yet, but Ocie believes he has a good chance of winning. After all, a burglar once collected damages in California when he fell through a skylight and accused the building owner of neglect.

But win or lose, Ocie has made a statement that symbolizes our times. He has said, "Who, me? I'm the victim." He could be a savings and loan operator. "My fault? This wouldn't have happened if the government regulators had been doing their job. Or if they hadn't done their jobs." Or he could be one of countless professional athletes who cry: "It's not my fault. I have an addictive personality, or drinking disorder, or gambling disorder, or sexual disorder, and my agent and I want a new contract."

There are people who spend most of their lives 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 has let them down. They want to look everywhere else for a solution to their problem except within themselves.

It's nothing new. In the Old Testament story of Moses, Aaron, the people of Israel, and the golden calf, Moses came down the mountain after being away for a time and found that Aaron and the people had fashioned a golden calf which they were worshiping. When Moses confronted Aaron and asked what happened, Aaron said, "Don't blame me. I'm the victim. You were away so long that the people got restless and wanted this golden calf to worship. They gave me all their gold jewelry, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf.

It's not my fault. It's your fault for being away so long, the people's fault, and the fire's fault. I'm only an innocent victim."

The crippled man that 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 this pool for most of that time. When Jesus met him and discovered that he had been there for that length of time, he did not ask, "Why haven't you been healed, or why are you crippled?" Jesus asked a much more direct and relevant question, "Do you want to be healed?"

The man didn't hear that question, or if he heard it, he ignored it. He answered as if he had been asked, "Why are you still crippled?" He then began to give excuses for his problems. He said 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, which it did periodically, the first person into the water would be healed. The crippled man told Jesus he was the victim of the neglect of others. The story does not give us the complete 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 hadn't been healed; I asked instead, do you want to be healed? It's time you stopped making excuses and blaming others for your condition. It doesn't accomplish anything. It's only an excuse for remaining in your present condition."

Have you noticed that many of our problems, large and small, stem from having a victim mentality? Here is an individual who claims that he is the victim of his terrible parents and the mistakes they made as he was growing up. Or here's someone else who says, "I can't help it. It's all the fault of the environment in which I was raised. After all, I came from a dysfunctional family."

But we forget that our lives are not wholly conditioned or dictated by how our parents treated us, how our friends responded to us, or the environment in which we were raised. Certainly, these things have a strong influence on our lives. But as human beings, created by God, we are free under God to be the persons God meant us to be. To be sure, we all have limits, and our environment does influence us. Yet we have the freedom to give ourselves over to anyone or anything. We can continue to blame the past, the events of the present, or someone else for our condition and thereby remain the way we are. 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 a puppet with someone else pulling the strings or a bouncing ball that someone else is bouncing.

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?

First, remember when you meet the victim mentality in someone else or yourself, "why" is not always the only question. The "why" question and the answer, if we can find it, do not

necessarily solve the immediate problem. We need to go beyond the “why” and determine what we will do about it. In fact, some of our “why” questions aren’t helpful at all.
Suppose your daughter or son comes home and reports that they had an auto accident with your new car. “Why did you drive so carelessly?” you ask. There’s an accusation hidden underneath that question. You have automatically assumed your child was driving carelessly — and that may not be the case at all. What good does such a question do? What you have to deal with is the fact of the accident. “Was anyone hurt?” “Are you all right?” “Tell me how it happened.”

I, too, find myself wanting to ask an accusatory “why” question too quickly. Some time ago, a man came into my office. He said that 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 but had no money for the first month’s rent or the required security deposit. I was tempted to ask, “Why did you move to Lincoln when you had no place to live?” But that question and the answer to it would have been of little help in solving the immediate problem at hand. It might have given him a chance to defend himself and his decision to move here. But the immediate problem was to find a suitable place to house the family.

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 help deal with the situation? Wouldn’t it be better to say, “Let’s see what we can do about cleaning up the spilled milk.” Then we can analyze why it happened so that there will hopefully be fewer spills in the future. Suggesting the child is clumsy only creates more of a victim mentality.

Secondly, in dealing with ourselves and others in overcoming the victim mentality, we need to be aware that some of us find a kind of perverse comfort in remaining a victim. That way, we don’t have to take any responsibility for our actions or do anything about changing. We can remain as we are. When Jesus asked the man by the pool, “Do you want to be healed?” it was the most pertinent question of all. It’s another way of asking, “Do you want to change?” The fact is that some people do not want to be healed. Dr. Siegel, in his best-selling book Love, Medicine, and Miracles, writes, “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.
“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 sick man complained in terms of the help that others never gave him, Jesus put the stress on his own attitude about himself and his illness.

“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, 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. Some people seek refuge in being a victim. It has 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 that our various kinds of illnesses, weaknesses, pains, headaches, and other ways in which we consider ourselves victims 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 that some of them 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's quite possible that the sick man by the pool had settled into a fairly interesting and perhaps even profitable vocation — the vocation of being a perpetual victim in which he was the recipient of considerable sympathy and attention.

"Do you want to be healed?" Some do not, because illness brings attention. One woman wrote: "As soon as I get inside the hospital, my state of mind changes. Without suspecting it, I assume that I am the center of attention. It is my accident, my doctors, my nurses, my injections, my meals, my digestion, my thermometer. In this way, everything gradually becomes exclusively mine 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 help make me believe it."

"Do you want to be healed? Do you want to change? Do you want to no longer be a victim?" These are all fair and important questions. Jesus said to the man, "Rise, take up your pallet, and walk." To no longer be a victim is to lose the protection, care, and support one receives as a victim. But it is to be free.

God calls us to wholeness, health, and freedom. As some of you know, one of my longtime friends and colleagues in the ministry is the Rev. Dr. Harold Wilke, a man born without any arms. He was here as a guest in our church a few years back. When he was here, a woman asked him in a public meeting whether or not he believed that in the life after this life, he would have arms and be whole. And he replied, "I believe 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 and in God's acceptance of me." Harold has no need to see himself as a victim, and neither do we. Amen.