Sunday, May 16, 2004
AN IMPORTANT QUESTION
John 5:2-9

"Do you want to be made well?" To a man who had been ill for 38 years, this must've sounded like a dumb and impertinent question. But that's the question Jesus asked him. Impertinent or not, it was the most important question that had ever been asked of this paralyzed individual. "Do you want to be made well?"

Believe it or not, there are people who spend most of their time being professional victims. Some of these professional victims are known as hypochondriacs. They claim to be sick most of the time. When they do not get well, it's because they feel neglected or no one believes them. One hypochondriac had this epitaph on his gravestone: "I told you I was sick."

In addition to hypochondriacs, there are other people who always find an excuse outside themselves for their problems. It's never their fault. If they have trouble getting along with other people, it's because their parents made such a mess of their childhood, or because no one understands them, or 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 has let them down.

I believe that the paralyzed man that Jesus met one day by the pool of Bethzatha was a kind of professional victim. The story says that he had been this way for 38 years. Thus, 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 paralyzed?" He asked a much more direct and relevant question: "Do you want to be made well?"

Jesus knew that asking "why" is not always the most helpful. I remember early in my ministry, I asked an alcoholic why he drank so much. He said it was because of his wife. I then asked his wife why she nagged her husband, and she said it was because he drank so much. Only later did I learn that a better question for this man was, "Do you want to stop drinking?"

When Jesus asked the paralyzed man if he wanted to be made well, the man avoided that question and answered as if he had been asked, "Why are you still paralyzed?" He gave excuses for why he was still paralyzed. 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 this particular pool began to bubble, which it did periodically, the first person into the pool would be healed. In other words, the man saw himself as a victim of the neglect of others.

The story does not give us the complete conversation between Jesus and this man. The "healing stories" in the New Testament are condensed versions of what took place. You can imagine, however, that Jesus said to him something like this: "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 to stop making excuses and blaming others for your condition. That doesn't help. It's only an excuse for remaining in your present condition."

What Jesus was really asking was, "Do you want to change?" According to Dr. Bernie Siegel, the author of the book Love, Medicine & Miracles, patients vary enormously. Here's what he wrote: "Some patients 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. They have a strong desire to be made well.

"Do you want to be made well?" This man's paralysis, or whatever it was, symbolizes any problem, weakness, or pain that you might have. Do you want to be made well? Or do you want to make excuses and consider yourself a victim?

The fact is that some people seem to need their aches and pains, their problems and weaknesses. 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."

Aches, pains, headaches, feeling depressed, and emphasizing your weaknesses can serve you. They can give you all kinds of excuses. They can get you sympathy. This is not to say they are not real. The problem can be that deep down you are not at all sure if you want to be completely free of them.

It is quite possible that the paralyzed man by the pool had settled into a fairly interesting and perhaps even profitable vocation — the vocation of being a victim in which he was the recipient of considerable sympathy and attention. It could be that he used his paralysis as an escape from the responsibilities of life. Maybe he made some little effort to get into the pool from time to time so that he might be healed, but he always conveniently found someone else to blame for his not being able to get into the pool when the water first began to bubble.

I read about an individual who spent years developing an elaborate pattern of self-assigned research in a public library as a result of the fact that a fear of crossing almost any street made gainful employment impossible. He resented strongly any efforts at resolving his phobia and, of course, making it possible for him to get a job. His answer to the question Jesus asked, "Do you want to be made well?" was, "No, I want to remain as I am."

Do you want to be made well? Some individuals may want to say "yes," but because of their victim mentality, they do not think it's possible for them to change. Here's an individual who claims that he is the way he is because of his terrible parents and the mistakes they made as he was growing up. He believes his life is totally determined by the environment in which he was raised. He came from a dysfunctional family. He's a victim. I often wonder if there is any family anywhere that is not dysfunctional in some way.

If you find yourself thinking like a victim, ask yourself: Do you truly believe that your life is totally conditioned or dictated by how your parents treated you or how your friends respond to you? To be sure, these things can have a strong influence in your life. But as a human being created in God's image, you have more control over your life than you can imagine. Of course, every person has certain limits and your environment does have an influence on you.

The problem is when you want to blame everything that you consider a failure in your life on what's going on around you. Then you can sell out and come to believe that every part of your life — your present and your future — is controlled by events beyond your control. Then you are a puppet with someone else pulling the strings or a bouncing ball that someone else is bouncing.

You can read “victim” stories every day. Benny McClure claims he’s a victim. He was walking along a street in St. Louis, minding his own business. His business is stealing things. He saw a woman with a purse and decided to acquire it, sort of a hostile takeover. The woman resisted his takeover attempt, so Benny, who is 24 and a skilled fighter, knocked her down and gave her a few kicks. The takeover was completed quickly, and purse in hand, Benny took off running.

A taxi driver saw what happened and radioed an alert while he followed Benny with his cab. Benny’s foot speed was no match for the cab driver’s gas pedal, and he soon had Benny cornered. “I told him to halt,” said the cab driver, “and I saw him reaching for something which I thought was a weapon.”

As it turned out, the thief wasn’t reaching for a weapon, but in the meantime, the cab driver used his car to pin Benny against a wall, and that action broke one of his legs. The police arrived and took Benny to a hospital. They also took the owner of the purse to the hospital, as she had been beaten up pretty badly. Later, a judge sentenced Benny to eight years in prison.

But then Benny claimed he was the victim. 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. He’s asking for five million dollars in damages because his leg still hurts and he can’t run as well as he used to. The irony is that while Benny claims to be a victim, he’s not acting like one.

The last I heard, the case hasn’t come to trial yet, but Benny believes he has a good chance of winning. After all, he knows another thief who collected damages when he fell through a skylight as he was running from a crime he had committed. He accused the building owner of negligence.

Do you want to be made well? It’s an important question to ask yourself not only in terms of physical or mental problems but also in other areas of life. Do you want to change, or do you want to remain as you are?

Here are some suggestions for helping positive change to take place which come out of this healing story from John’s gospel:

Remember, when you encounter the victim mentality in yourself or in others, “why” is not always the first question to ask. The “why” question, and the answer if you can find it, does not necessarily solve the immediate problem. You need to go beyond the “why” and determine what you are going to do about it. There are times when the “why” question is not helpful at all.

Suppose your daughter comes home and reports that she had an auto accident with your new car. “Why did you drive so carelessly?” you might want to ask. There’s an accusation hidden under that question. You have automatically assumed your child was driving carelessly, but that might not be the case at all. What good does such a question accomplish? What you have to first deal with is the reality: “Are you all right? Tell me how it happened.”

A child spills a glass of milk at the breakfast 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.” You can then talk about how it happened, and hopefully, there will be fewer spills in the future.

Do you want to be made well? Do you want to change? Do you want to no longer see yourself as a victim? In what ways do you see yourself as being paralyzed? These are all fair and important questions. Jesus said to the man who was paralyzed, “Stand up. Take up your mat and walk.”

God calls you to wholeness, health, and freedom. One of my long-time friends and colleagues in the ministry was the Rev. Dr. Harold Wilke, a man born without any arms. He was a guest preacher in this congregation about ten years ago. He died about a year ago after having an inspired career as an ordained minister.

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. 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 and in the way I accept myself.” Harold never saw himself as a victim. The same can be true for you. Amen.