Sunday, September 10, 1972
PROCEDURES AND PERSONS
Mark 2:27 (8) 7, 18, 65

The other day, after returning to work from vacation, a person was told, “You can’t do it that way; it’s not according to the way the system is set up.” But the person replied, “That woman needs help now. It can’t wait until all the proper forms are filled out and all the procedures are satisfied.”

Most of us have had this experience. We’ve been told in one way or another, “You can’t do it that way!” And why? Because it’s not according to the procedures, the established way of doing things, the way it’s always been done.

Well, most of us, after a change of schedule and routine for the summer months, are now back into our own systems, procedures, and regular work. Schools have begun again; our own church school is enrolling persons this morning. We’re all getting back into our usual fall schedules.

But what does all of this have to do with our Christian faith? Our text for today points the way.

One day as Jesus and his disciples were walking through a grain field, they began to take some of the heads of grain and were rubbing it out in their hands and eating the grain. It was a natural thing to do as they were walking and talking. But the day of the week on which they were doing it was not any ordinary day, it was the Sabbath. And there were witnesses to what was going on, unfriendly observers. The Pharisees who saw what had happened were quick to accuse Jesus and his disciples of breaking the religious law — the 4th commandment, “Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work; but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; in it you shall not do any work.”

Now what Jesus and his disciples had been doing might not seem like work to us, but the rule about not working on the Sabbath had added to it through the years all sorts of interpretations and traditions. The letter of the law was completely spelled out. The prohibitions were very specific. Thus, the Pharisees said to Jesus, “Look, what L you are doing is not lawful on the Sabbath.”

After a brief discussion, Jesus said in effect, “You are right: there is a commandment about the Sabbath Day and rest, but you are misunderstanding it and misusing it.” And then Jesus made the statement which is our text for today — “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.” Or to paraphrase, “Man was not made to serve the Sabbath, but the Sabbath was given by God to serve people.”

1. Note first that Jesus was not in any way saying that observing the Sabbath, the Lord’s Day as a day of rest and refreshment and worship was wrong. Jesus himself, as the New Testament in other places reminds us, regularly went to the synagogue on the Sabbath.

Jesus knew, as the Old Testament points out, that the observance of the Lord’s Day as a day of rest and worship is part of our reverent acknowledgment of God’s creative activity and more than that, an acknowledgment of God’s calmness and restfulness.

When the Old Testament creation story points out that God rested after the work of creation, part of what it is saying is that we all need to take a rest, have a change of pace from our ordinary round of activities. And even deeper than this, the story of God resting on the 7th day of creation is reminding us that it is in the nature of all creation that it is made in a kind of rhythm where there is a time for work and also a time for rest and refreshment. In fact, such a rhythm is necessary if we are to continue to exist and be creative ourselves.

To put it another way, our human nature demands the rhythm of work and rest. Life does not flow in a steady stream. It pulsates. Life is neither static sameness nor erratic change. Life and the world at every level are characterized by steeps and plateaus, steps and stops, high points and low points, fast and slow.

Just as a tree cannot decide to keep on bearing leaves and fruit through the cold hard months of winter with no time for rest, neither can a person continue to drive his mind and body long after those organisms have passed the point of needed rest and recreation.

However, in human experience, there is nothing which automatically regulates our period of work and rest, except when we simply become too tired and then have to take a rest or when we become ill and have to rest for a longer period of time. So, the setting aside of regular periods or days of rest and change of pace, like Sunday or some other day is for our own good. The sabbath in this sense was made for man.

In a similar way, vacations are necessary, and they are for us the long Sabbath, an extended period of rest and refreshment.

It is interesting to note that in all cultures, no matter what the religion, there is some kind of work and rest rhythm. The only difference is the time. Not all cultures have chosen the 7th day or the 1st day of the week for the day off.

In our time, in our modern industrial-urbanized-technical society, we also know that the Sabbath for one person maybe on a different day than that for another. By Sabbath we mean here a day of rest. Because of the way our systems run, it's almost impossible for all persons everywhere to have the same day off.

Our modern medical and hospital care, our police and fire protection requirements, our transportation and communication systems, our military services, systems of defense, our utility services, and many other aspects of our productive and public service economy make it absolutely necessary that large numbers of people be at work on every day of the week. In fact, there being at work is what makes it possible for many of us to enjoy our day off.

I feel certain that Jesus would say in our time, in line with the statement he made to the pharisees, "the Sabbath was made for man," that the important point is that every person should have and desperately needs a day of rest from his normal duties and routines, including a. time set aside for worship of God. For us in our kind of society, it simply means that all of us cannot observe the Sabbath, the Lord's Day on the same day of the week. And for the institutional church this undoubtedly means that in the not-too-distant future, we will need to hold worship services on other days and nights of the week in addition to those on Sunday mornings. We here at First Plymouth are certainly open to that possibility.

The Sabbath was made for persons. This means that our sabbath rest, on whatever day it is, is to be used for refreshment, for change of pace, so as to give new meaning to all of life. It

means further that life is more than work, that we are not bound to go on slaving like mad with no break. On the contrary, we are called upon to stop, to interpose pauses in the round of our work and take a new look at the theme of our life, a new look at God who undergirds all of our living, our rest, and our work.

2. And there is even a wider application of the text-- “The Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath.”

This saying of Jesus needs to be applied as a test to every institution, every procedure, every system, including all of the systems and institutions of religion. Jesus is saying here that all institutions, all traditions, all procedures, all systems are made to serve persons rather than persons serving the institution or becoming a slave to the system, tradition, or procedure.

Sometimes we get so involved in our organization or system that our only goal is to get it running smoothly and we don’t want people interfering with our little systems and procedures. Of course, it would be easier if persons weren’t around to upset things.

Just imagine what wonderful hospitals we could run if the patients didn’t get in the way to foul up our systems and procedures. Think of the gleaming laboratories, the antiseptic rooms, the faultless corridors, the impeccable charts, if only doctors and nurses and administrators were allowed to populate the nation’s hospitals.

And think of libraries. It has often seemed to me as if the book borrower is considered only as a necessary nuisance who interferes with the Dewey decimal system and the perfect uniformity of each book in its proper place on the shelf. We sometime can almost come to believe that libraries are for the books and the librarians rather than for the persons who read the books.

Housing systems too, would approach the ideal if only we could find a way to get rid of the tenants. They tend to eat, which creates a nasty garbage problem. They also tend to have children and you know what children can do to walls and windows, lawns and driveways. If people would only go somewhere else, we could have ·toe most admirable housing systems in the world.

The same is true of parks. Beautiful parks would remain beautiful and perfectly neat if only we could keep people away. But what are parks for?

And think how nice elementary schools, junior high and high schools would run if we didn’t have to bother with students. Or think how smoothly universities and col-leges would run if only the professors and the administrators were allowed on campus. Research could go on uninterrupted and learned papers could be written and filed away.

But what are these systems and institutions for? And so, we come back to the saying of Jesus — “The Sabbath was made for man not man for the Sabbath.” Jesus was pointing out the danger that institutions like the Sabbath, like churches, like hospitals, like parks, like libraries, like any organization, are always tempted to become ends in themselves and the persons they were designed to help and serve are often forgotten or are just seen as necessary evils to be put up with. Persons are only all right as long as they do not interfere with the established way of doing things, the procedures.

We've all been frustrated by the answer from someone--"You can't do it that way, and why? Because it will foul up the system."

Even in commercial establishments, where the public is an absolute necessity for survival, one still finds evidence· of the temptation to think that people were made for the institution rather than the institution for the person.

One man said to me recently, "I have been in many restaurants where the customer is regarded as an unwarranted intruder on the operating procedures. The cashier is too busy going through yesterday's checks to make change for your bill; the hostess is too involved with rearranging tables for dinner to give you a table for lunch, and the manager, of course, is upstairs working on reports."

And you and I know that the church as an institution is certainly not immune to the temptation we have been describing here. In fact, Jesus was talking to the church of his time when he was talking to the Pharisees. But in our time too, we often tend to think that people were made for the church rather than the church for persons. Sometimes we may even think that persons are in the way of the church program, and we forget that we are here to serve persons and not the system.

In the parable of the good Samaritan, the priest and the Levite passed by the man hurt in the ditch by the side of the road probably because there were in a hurry t:o get to the temple to carry on some program. Or suppose it had been the Sabbath and they felt they weren't supposed to do any work. In either case, the system, the program, or the procedure becomes more important that the person.

Let it be noted that Jesus was not against traditions, rules, systems or institutions and organizations. In fact, in our kind of complex and increasingly crowded world, they are even more important than before. But at the same time with more automated procedures and with computer systems and all the rest of technology, the temptation is even greater for the procedures and systems to become ends in themselves, to become gods instead of servants, and the persons they were designed to serve are forgotten.

Is there a person here who has not felt like spindling or folding or punching new holes in some computer card which has our account mixed up? Again, the point is, technology, computers are made for persons, not persons for them.

So, the ultimate goal in life is not just to get the system, procedure, institution, or organization running smoothly, important as that may be. The ultimate goal is to get it to serve persons. The validity of every institution, of every tradition, of every procedure or organization always lies outside itself. The question needs always be asked, "does it serve persons in the way it was meant to serve?"

Therefore, we need always to be ready to amend, to change our procedures and our systems and be willing to make exceptions so that persons are served. Then instead of seeing procedures and systems as enemies, we can be truly grateful for them and for the service they give us.

God's judgment on all of us is going to be according to what we did to serve persons and not what we did to serve systems or institutions. Amen.