Sunday, April 24, 1977
SYSTEMS AND PEOPLE
Mark 2:23-28, 3:1-6

Not long ago in California, a 72-year-old retired government worker was brought to a hospital emergency ward by his 12-year-old companion. Four days later when the 72-year-old man and the 12-year-old girl were back in their apartment, a County Welfare worker dropped in on the pair and initiated legal action to have the child made a dependent of the court. According to the report of the welfare worker, the old man and the child were living in a tiny downtown apartment without adequate heating, cooking facilities or bedroom space. Furthermore, the man and the child were not related to each other. The child had run away from her mother, a confirmed alcoholic, a year and a half before, and the old man was noticeably senile.

A Superior Court judge assigned the child to a licensed foster home and committed her adopted grandfather to a medical facility for old people. The hearing lasted less than three minutes and was one of nearly 100 cases processed that day.

Four months later, the child was in a Los Angeles juvenile detention facility with criminal charges pending. The old man she had been living ¼7ith lay comatose 40 miles away and was being fed intravenously while doctors tried to diagnose a series of stroke like afflictions. The child was assigned to a counselor and after first refusing to talk, finally unfolded a description of a. Peter Pan existence with the old man that had provided her with the closest thing to happiness she'd known in her short and troubled life.

The counselor, an insightful young woman, researched the case history and judicial reports. The child had been given a medical checkup the day after she was picked up by the welfare department. She had been, according to the report, underweight but otherwise in excellent health. Although she had not attended school with any sort of regularity, she scored well on academic tests. Psychological evaluation placed her in the 13 to 15 age bracket emotionally.

Her adopted grandfather also had been examined and was reported to be in good health. An observer described him as "good-humored and perceptive." According to the child, he received a monthly retirement check which they had stretched by shopping carefully. They had taken daily L walks together and for entertainment had watched television or played a complicated. board game aptly entitled "Aggravation."

The counselor also discovered that the old man and the 12-year-old had aided, encouraged, and loved each other. Their living quarters weren't much to look at, but health wise probably weren't much worse tr1an those found in many rest homes. They were happy and were doing a competent job in managing their affairs. What the system did in effect was to destroy two functioning members of society by interfering.

The old man is now hopelessly senile, and it will take a minor miracle to divert the child from criminality and eventually prison.

The intentions of the welfare law, of the system, which separated the 12-year-old, and her adopted grandfather were good. But as in other aspects of our lives, all too often our efforts to do good sometimes make matters worse because we want everyone to fit into neatly defined systems and categories. We make judgments about what is best for people. And because we develop elaborate systems to dea.1 with problems, the ·systems lose their flexibility and

become rigid. We quickly forget what JESUS said-- “The sabbath was made for man, not man for the sabbath!” Or to paraphrase, “Institutions and systems are made to serve people, rather than persons being made to serve or fit into systems or institutions.”

The worst part about many of our systems, institutions, and procedures that we set up is their inflexibility. Jesus was not against the institution and system of the sabbath in his day. He respected it. He knew that all people need a day of rest for refreshment and worship and acknowledgement of God. But when the institution of the Sabbath became so systematized and rigid that a person was denounced for healing a sick person on the Sabbath, then the system was no longer serving people, but rather people were becoming slaves to the system.

So, the first thing this passage from the Bible tells us about systems and people is that all systems need to remain flexible. We’ve all been frustrated by the answer from someone who is part of a system or institution saying to us — "You can’t do that!” And why not? “Because it does not fit into the system. It doesn’t fit the pattern and rules we’ve devised.” We’re told that we have to follow the rules that have been set up even though in certain exceptional situations those rules may do more harm than good.

In the case of the old man and the 12-year-old girl, another rule about systems should’ve been followed and that is, “if something is working, leave it alone!“

Not only do many of our systems tend to become rigid and inflexible but we ourselves often tend to put people into boxes and categories and if anyone deviates from the way we think the system should operate, we think they are weird or out of their minds or subversive!

This letter appeared in “Dear Abby” not long ago. “Dear Abby: We live in one of the best neighborhoods in town. There is not one house on our block worth less than $75,000. Some new neighbors moved in next door, and. I under-stand they bought the house for the asking price and paid cash.

They seem very nice, but they are weird. The first thing we noticed was that they didn’t have a television antenna, so my little boy asked their little boy about it, and he was told they didn’t have a television set! They have only one automobile (and a. two-car garage!) and the father drives the car to work every day. The children and the mother all use the bus. They rarely go anywhere except to church. The wife doesn’t have any fancy clothes or jewelry or furs. The children aren’t permitted to have any toys dealing with war or violence. Could they belong to some offbeat religious cult? What do you make of them?”

2. The second thing that needs to be said about systems and people from the Christian point of view is that the exceptions to the system are those that are often the most wonderful. People can be unpredictable! Things sometimes work out in miraculous ways in spite of the system.

In an Austin, Texas, suburb, a retired Congregational minister nodded his understanding of an ultimatum delivered by two sympathetic but firm policeman. His wife — who had been a widow when he married her shortly before his retirement--was a light sleeper and occasionally left the house early in the morning, got hopelessly lost, then turned herself over to the nearest law-enforcement officer to be taken home. The minister had suffered a fall and had to walk on crutches. And because of medicine he was taking, he slept too soundly to be aware of her early morning expeditions.

The policeman made it clear that they would ask the courts to undertake action to force either the minister's wife or the two of them to take up· residence in a supervised nurs-ing facility. The minister was determined to find a more — satisfactory answer. As an interim measure, he talked a neighbor into allowing her children to watch and enter-tain his wandering wife.

He did not know that the children, ages 8, 10, and 11, had been in trouble for theft, malicious mischief, and running away from home. The older two were in fact on court-ordered probation. He offered them 50¢ an hour plus snacks and treats. Half asleep and sometimes complaining, they took turns "adult-sitting" in the elderly couple's home, at first stealing odds and ends and commandeering the TV.

But gradually they changed. So did the minister's wife. She began to bake again and to play the piano. Buttonless coats and torn blouses appeared in her sewing basket. Her memory seemed to improve. So did her housekeeping. She asked her husband for guidance books that her young friends could read. She insisted that they bring their homework with them when they visited and laughed and told them how skittish and stupid she had been in school.

They picked flowers for her, made vases and pencil holders, wove God's eyes and scarves, and formed a delegation to tell her husband that she needed new underwear and hose. The mother cornered the minister to thank him for what he'd done for her children. At school their grades and conduct had improved. Instead of squandering their earnings, they had purchased gifts for their mother and some furniture items.

The minister's wife had become a child again in a new way and the children he had enlisted to entertain her had grown to an adulthood denied them by previous experiences. The ending cycle of one life had merged into the beginning cycles of three other lives.

A miracle was taking place that none of our carefully con-structed systems could produce or allow for.

3. The third thing that needs to be said about systems and people is that with any system we devise or construct, we need to have a sense of humility about it and what it can accomplish. As one of the verses in the next hymn we are going to sing puts it, "Our little systems have their day, they have their day and cease to be." Too often we make gods of our systems and become their slaves, and then we come to believe that some new system we have put together is going to solve all the problems in tha.t area.

On April 14, a front-page article in the LINCOLN STAR had the headline — "CONSOLIDATION SAID FAILURE!" The story was about a recently completed study done for the National Institute of Education. The study found that the newer larger regional schools cost as much or more to run, as the old, decentralized rural school systems did. More signicant1y, the study indicated that the children receive no better education.

At the same time, the study called the consolidation of rural schools and school districts "the most successfully implemented educational policy of the past 50 years." In other words, consolidation had been accomplished according to plan and even though the systems functioned beautifully as systems, they had not necessarily improved the overall quality of education, nor had they brought forth better life chances for the children who attend the new schools.

Such studies remind us to have a sense of humility about the systems we devise. “Our little systems have their day; they have their day and cease to be. They are but broken lights of thee, and thou, O Lord, art more than they.”

There’s good news in this as well as not so good. Such examples show us that we human beings cannot be simply put into systems and programmed according to some master plan. We have a freedom given to us by our Creator that transcends any and all systems we create if we let it.

This is beautifully illustrated in a book entitled, “THE RUSSIANS,” by Hedrick Smith. Smith, a New York Times reporter lived in Russia for a number of years. He discovered that in spite of the image of aggressive state atheism, there are twice as many church adherents as card carrying Communists. He also discovered that in a society that has enshrined state ownership of property, more than half the living space is privately owned; that in a system of rigorously collectivized agriculture, nearly 30% of farm output is grown on private plots and must of it sold through sanctioned free enterprise markets.”

Smith says at one point in his book, “It was the latent anarchy in Russian life that surprised me the most — the irrepressive unruliness of human beings in a system of rules.” I think it’s a beautiful thing to realize that in any society in spite of the careful and intricately devised systems we put together, including computers and organization charts, we human beings have an irrepressible unruliness, an irrepressible freedom that refuses to let us be put into boxes or rigid categories or to be com-pletely controlled by anyone. I find much hope in that. In every man, woman and child, there is an infinite mystery of freedom, of personhood and this cannot be measured or compared or categorized.

We will always have to live in systems of some: kind. What we have to watch is that they serve us rather than us serving them.

Christian maturity requires that our hope and trust in systems or institutions of any kind be chastened and disciplined. If our hopes are too small, our lives will lack the dynamic which only the spirit of expectancy can give. If our hopes are too romantic, we will meet so much disappointment and frustration that we are likely to lapse into a permanent and sour cynicism. We need the kind of hope in which patience, humility and experience have all had a part.

We have been bedeviled for centuries by the belief that we can organize and force people and things to fit into systems which will be always neatly organized and run smoothly. Such is not the case. People, the creation is ambiguous, paradoxical, open-ended, and mysterious. What is needed is to delight in this fact. The world and people are eternally resistant to rigidly organized systems. Knowing this, we can see systems and people not as problems to be solved but as mysteries which save us from despair. Amen.