Sunday, June 3, 1984
COMPUTERS AND PEOPLE
Mark 2:23-27

Recently this church purchased a small computer for use in the church office. Last summer we purchased another kind of small computer for the furnace room in order to regulate our cooling and heating systems more efficiently, and thus conserve energy and save money.

A computer is a kind of electronic system which can sort out pieces of information in a very rapid fashion. It systematizes material.

Systems are not new to human beings — there are only new kinds of systems and more complicated ones. In fact, no one these days can avoid contact with systems. Systems are everywhere; big systems, little systems, mechanical systems, electronic systems and those special systems that consist of organized associations of people. To protect ourselves, all of us need to continually learn to live with systems, to control them, lest they control us.

We've probably all had the experience of being told by someone, "you can't do it that way. It's not according to the way the system is set up." Computers in particular can cause us to get that kind of answer from someone. "You can't do it that way: that's not the way the program or software is designed. It won't compute." At times we want to answer and perhaps do answer — "then change the program." "Systems are to be made to serve us, not us the system."

Even though there weren't computers in Jesus' time, he had the same problem with systems as we have.

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 talking and talking. But the day of the week on which they were doing it was not an ordinary day. It was the Sabbath. And there were witnesses who saw what they were doing. These witnesses were quick to accuse Jesus and his disciples of breaking the rules of the religious system outlined in the 4th commandment, "Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work; but the seventh is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. In it you shall not do any work."

Now the problem is to define what is work. What Jesus and his disciples had been doing might not seem like work to us, but the commandment about not working on the Sabbath had added to it though the years all sorts of definitions, interpretations and traditions. The letter of the law was completely spelled out. The prohibitions were very specific. It was a system, tightly defined. Thus, the Pharisees said to Jesus, "What you and your disciples are doing is not lawful to do on the Sabbath." In other words, "You can do that, it's not according to the system. It doesn't compute."

Jesus answered, "you are right, there is a commandment about the Sabbath Day and keeping it holy, but you are misunderstanding it and misusing it." And then Jesus made the statement which is our test for this sermon — "the Sabbath was made for human beings, not human beings for the Sabbath." Or the paraphrase, human beings were not made to serve systems, rather systems were made to serve human beings.

Now let's look more carefully at how this text applies to computers, to people, and to other kinds of systems.

1. Note first that Jesus was not in any way saying that observing the Sabbath, or the Lord's Day as a day of rest and worship is a part of our reverent acknowledgment of God's creative activity and a reminder that God and God's creation are holy. To set aside one day as holy is to remind us that all days are holy.

Jesus also knew that we all need a change of pace, a time for rest from our ordinary round of activities. Our human nature, as does the rest of creation, requires a 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, step and stops, high points and low points, holding patterns and landings, beginnings and endings.

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 or her mind and body long after those organisms have passed the point of needed rest and recreation.

We need times of rest and relaxation. 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 was made for human beings.

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

So, among other things, the idea of a Sabbath day, a day of rest was a systematized way building in a regular day of rest and worship.

But like all systems then and now, as they come into being, they take on a life of their own, and that includes computers.

One person put it this way: "Systems are like babies; once you get one, you have it. They don't go away. On the contrary, they display the most remarkable persistence. They not only persist; they grow. And as they grow, they encroach."

The growth potential of systems was explored in a tentative, preliminary by Parkinson, who concluded that administrative systems maintain an average growth of 5 to 6 percent per annum, regardless of the work to be done.

In Jesus' time, the system of the Sabbath had grown from the simple language of the 4th commandment to literally hundreds and hundreds of rules and definitions about the Sabbath.

Then pretty soon we find we're serving the system instead of the system serving us. Thus, Jesus reminds us — "the Sabbath was made for human being, not human beings for the Sabbath."

2. This saying of Jesus needs to be applied as a test to every institution, every procedure, every system, including all the systems and institutions of religion, and all the new electronic machinery that is being continually invented and used.

What happens is that we get so involved with our organization or system or computer that our only goal is to get it running smoothly and then soon we don't want people interfering with our

systems and procedures. In other words, systems develop goals of their own the instant they come into being, and if we're not careful those intra-system goals will come first.

Some years ago, for example, the United Nations suspended for an entire day its efforts at dealing with drought, détente, and desert oil, in order to debate whether U.N. employees should continue to ride first class on airplanes. All systems have blind, instinctive urges to maintain themselves and not change, and worse, their own goals can become more important than the goals for which they were brought into being.

So, for example hospitals can come to think — 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. The book borrower is a nuisance who interferes with the Dewey decimal system and the perfect uniformity of each book in its proper place on the shelf. It's a temptation to believe that libraries are for books and the librarians rather than for the people who come to borrow and 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 we all know what children can do to walls and windows, lawns and driveways. If people would only go somewhere else, we could have the 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 and universities would run if we didn't have to bother with students.

And don't forget the churches. If churches didn't have to put up with visitors and other kinds of outsiders who use the building, then the ministers and other staff could spend all their time taking care of the members and we wouldn't have to worry about helping others who are not in the church. If only we could forget that Jesus said, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations." Or that we are to love our neighbors and by neighbor he meant anyone, anywhere, member or not who is in need.

There is a story of a group of people who were shipwrecked along a dangerous shore. They survived and so they decided to set up a lifesaving station at that very point in order to save others who were shipwrecked there. But soon because the spot was so beautiful and because they began to enjoy each other's company so much, they turned it into a private resort and forgot all about their original purpose.

So, we come back to the saying of Jesus. "Institutions and procedures and systems were made to serve human beings."

Even commercial establishments are not immune from forgetting this. One person 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.“

In the parable of the good Samaritan, the priest and the Levite passed by the man who was hurt and lying in the ditch by the side of the road probably because they were in a hurry to get to the temple in Jerusalem to carry on some program which had as its goal the helping of persons in need. Or maybe it was the Sabbath and they weren’t supposed to do any work.

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 that also means that with out computers, automated procedures, and her technology, the temptation is even greater for the systems to become ends in themselves, to become gods instead of servants, and the persons they were designed to serve are forgotten.

A hopeful indication was recently observed by someone who said they had seen a sign in a hospital. Taped to the wall of the nurses’ station, just above the Vital Signs Remote Sensing Console that enables the nurses to record whether the patient is breathing and even to take his or her pulse without actually going down the hall to see the patient was the following hand-lettered reminder: THE CHART IS NOT THE PATIENT.

So, the ultimate goal for all of us is not just to get the computer, or the system or the institution running smoothly, important as that may be. The ultimate goal is to get the computer or whatever the system is to serve people. The validity of every institution, of every tradition, of every system always lies outside itself. The question needs always to be asked, “does it serve people in the way it was meant to serve? Does it increase among people the love of God and neighbor?” Amen.