Sunday, January 24, 1982
DON'T FORCE IT!
Matthew 10:1,7-14

False assumptions are always alive and well in our society. One of these false assumptions which has been around for a long time is that if you apply enough force, the problem can be solved; raw power is the answer in almost every situation. Jesus Christ suggested however that most of the time strong can be wrong. There are situations which can-not be forced.

We've all known times when strong was wrong; when we broke what we meant to fix; when we bruised what we meant to comfort; when we overpowered what we meant to undergird. If we see something not going our way or the way we think it should go, many times our first tendency is to rush in with force and make it right.

I remember as a young man learning the valuable lesson that there are times when we shouldn't force it. My brother and I were building a homemade shower in the basement of the house in which we grew up. We were building it out of scraps and used parts. We happened to find two pieces of pipe which we were sure could be used if we could get them apart. They were threaded together in a kind of sleeve and had rusted tight with age. Since we didn't have a vise and the proper wrenches to unthread the two pieces, we took the pipe downtown to a hardware store where we knew the owner. He was waiting on a customer as we entered the store, so we went to the back where the workshop was. We put the pipe into the vise, took a large pipe wrench and began trying to force the two pieces apart.

Just as we were ready to apply all the force we had, the l1ardware store owner came back and asked, "do you want to have to buy new material, or do you want to be able to use that pipe?" He had seen us trying to force the two pieces apart and knew that if we applied much more force, we would damage both pieces. He said, "Don't force it!"

He took the pipe out of the vice, and standing it on end, took a hammer and began to lightly tap the sleeve all the way around. After doing this several times, he again put the pipe in the vise and tried with the wrench to unscrew one piece from the other. He applied a gentle pressure and saw that they were still held tightly together. Again, he took the pipe out of the vice and began patiently and lightly tapping the sleeve which held the two pieces together. Again, back to the vice to see if they could be unscrewed and then back to the tapping with the hammer. After a few more minutes had passed he was able to put the pipe in the vise, and easily unscrew one piece from the other.

Ever since that incident I often remember his warning — "Don't force it." Sometimes strong is wrong. There are all kinds of things in our life and in this world which cannot be forced. To do so is to break what we meant to fix.

"Don't force it." Jesus taught this to his disciples day after day in example and in parable. When he first called his disciples, he said, "Follow me." He invited them, but there was no threat. If a person said, "no," he let it be.

In the passage read from the Gospel of Matthew this morning, Jesus told his disciples to go and spread the good news of God's love. But he also told them at the same time, "don't force it." He said, "if the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it; but if it is unworthy, let your

peace return to you. And if anyone will not receive you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town." In other words, don't force it.

Jesus was saying the same thing when he said, "do not be anxious about your life." To be anxious is to try to force the issue. He went on to say, "Do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Let the day's own trouble be sufficient for the day."

"Don't force it!" This applies to our everyday lives in so many ways. How often we as parents try to force our children ratl1er than lead or guide them. We say, "If you don't do this, then don't bother to come back home."

In the parable of the prodigal son which JESUS told, the father did not try to force his younger son from leaving home. He didn't threaten him by saying, "If you leave home now, don't ever come back." To do that would've destroyed their relationship. Most of the time we need patience rather than force. I've had one of the partners in a marriage rush into my office and say that they've just found out something about their spouse, and he or she wants to take immediate action and force the issue. My usual advice is to not panic, don't force it too quickly. Wait before you take some hasty action you may later regret.

Or parents will say they've just discovered something about their child — maybe he or she has experimented with drugs or are running around with what they consider the wrong people--and they want to apply force as quickly as possible, and in so doing may break what they meant to fix.

I've heard parents say with all the force they can muster-- "If you marry that person, you are no longer a part of this family and don't ever come back to this house again." That's trying to force the issue in the wrong way.

There are so many things in our lives that cannot be forced. Growth, both physical and mental cannot be forced. It can be encouraged, supported, helped, affirmed, and celebrated, but it cannot be forced.

In the same way, maturity cannot be forced, but it too can be affirmed and encouraged and supported. We cannot force seed to grow. We can water the seed, fertilize it, keep it free from weeds, but we cannot force it to grow.

Religion cannot be forced. Again, it can be supported, encouraged, affirmed, and we can set an example. We can tell what our faith has meant to us — but no more than that. Jesus Christ never attempted to force anyone to follow him. He gave the invitation, explained the conditions, but then the decision was up to the individual.

That's what we try to do in our 9th grade class, with those who are joining the church this morning. We do our best to describe what it means to be a Christian and a church member. We study the Bible, we look at the life of Jesus Christ, we look at the church, but we do not force anyone or attempt to force anyone to become a church member. It's a decision each individual must make.

The issue of prayer in public schools is an attempt to force religion or a certain kind of religious faith onto the students. Some people my age remember the horrors of so-called voluntary compulsory chapel services in college. It was voluntary because we could choose which day of the week to attend chapel services. It was also voluntary in that most of the students in the

chapel services read newspapers, or textbooks, or slept. Very few actually participated in the worship services. Religion cannot be forced.

Let school-prayer legislation pass and it will do more harm than good. Each classroom and school district could turn into a miniature holy war. High Church Episcopalians who do not trust speaking to God in language newer than King James would be subjecting their children to mumbled prayers by teachers in the “you know” and “I mean” generation. Missouri-Synod Lutheran children who are not allowed to pray with American Lutheran children would not like having their prayers said for them by Buddhists in California or Transcendental Meditators in New Jersey. In Salt Lake City, Southern Baptists who are fighting for reading of scriptures in school will hear their young ones come home quoting the Book of Mormon, and they won’t like that. Elsewhere, the computer will solve the problem by printing out bland “to whom it may concern” prayers.

Religion cannot be forced. But it can be caught. I remember one high school teacher I had. She was a devout Christian who deeply influenced my life. She was first of all a superb teacher who helped me learn how to learn and to appreciate the value of an education. And she was also, and equally important, a loving and caring human being. She did not have to teach religion as such. She did not offer prayers in her classroom. She was not one to wear religious jewelry. But we knew instinctively of our teacher’s own deep faith. She inspired many of us. We would go to her classroom before or after school to test ideas with her and to seek her counsel. She was not afraid of exploring new ideas and of searching for the truth. She did not claim to have all the right answers. Yet she spoke simply and directly about her own deep convictions.

Religion cannot be forced. Faith in God is not transmitted that way. I also don’t want any government official or school official to define prayer, God, or faith for me. That would be an inevitable consequence of “official prayers” in public schools. I also believe it is wrong for any public agency to put even subtle pressure on children to pray in a particular way or at a prescribed time.

Furthermore, there is no evidence that the Supreme Court’s ban on official school prayers is the cause of any social evils. More than 90% of the nation’s public schools never had prayers before the Court ruling. Yet some religious leaders and politicians have argued that the Court is to blame for crime, racial conflict, drug abuse, political assassinations, the Vietnam War, sexual promiscuity, and the demise of the American family simply because official prayer is not allowed in the public schools. And they warn of worse troubles ahead if prayers are not returned to the schools.

Nonsense! No one or two minute lowest common denominator prayer can cure the illness of which those evils are symptoms. We certainly ought to pray for our schools and for our administrators and teachers, but never expect them to do our praying for us.

Just as religion or faith cannot be forced, so also love cannot be forced. We cannot force our children or anyone for that matter to love us. God will never force us to love God. Love by its nature has to be freely given and freely received. It cannot be coerced. Don’t try to force it. For then it is no longer love.

God never forces anyone nor for that matter does God try to impress us with power. Rather God comes to us in suffering love, in Christ on the cross. God comes to us and loves us with gentleness.

Not to force something, does not mean giving up or doing nothing, Gentle encouragement, support, setting a good example, waiting for the right time to act — these are all alternatives to force. Then success comes easier and we're not as likely to break what we meant to fix, or to bruise what we meant to comfort. Amen.