Sunday, January 19, 1992
WHEN FORCE WON'T WORK
Matthew 10:1-7,14

In last Sunday's sermon on "How to Make a New Beginning," I said that a new beginning has three parts: first, look forward with hope; second, leave some things behind (life is filled with necessary losses, we all carry around excess baggage, and we can't go forward with a new beginning without leaving some of those old ways of operating behind); and third, live joyfully in the present.

Today's sermon is connected with last Sunday's in this way: leaving some things behind means not being afraid to question some of our basic assumptions. The assumption I want us all to call into question is the belief that if you apply enough force, the problem can be solved. Or to put it another way, raw power is the answer in almost every situation. Jesus suggested another way. He knew that many times strong can be wrong, and might does not always make things right. There are some things in life that cannot be forced.

Haven't we all known situations 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? Yet, when we see something not going our way, we are still tempted to move in with force and make it right.

I remember as a young man learning the valuable lesson that there are times when force won't work. My brother and I were trying to build a shower in the basement of the house where we lived. We were building it out of scraps and used parts. We happened to find two pieces of pipe that we were certain 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 or the proper wrenches to unscrew the two pieces, we took the pipe downtown to a hardware store where we knew the owner and asked him if we could use his workshop in the back of the store. He was waiting on a customer, so he told us to go ahead. In the workshop, we put the pipe in the vise, took a large pipe wrench, and began trying to force the two pieces apart. It wouldn't budge. Just when we were about to apply all the force we had, the hardware store owner came into the back workshop and asked, "Do you want to buy new pipe or do you want to use what you have?" He had seen us trying to force the two pieces apart and knew that if we applied too much force, we would damage both pieces. He said, "If you want to unscrew one from the other, don't force it."

We stepped aside so he could show us what to do. He took the pipe out of the vise and, standing it on end, put a few drops of penetrating oil on the threads and then took a small 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 gentle pressure, but still, the pipe wouldn't yield. Again, he took the pipe out of the vise and began patiently and lightly tapping the sleeve that held the two pieces together. Again, back to the vise to see if they could be unscrewed, and then back to gently tapping with the hammer. After a few more minutes had passed, he was able to easily unscrew one piece from the other without doing any damage to the pipe itself.

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

Sometimes force won't work. Jesus taught this to his disciples day after day in example and parable. When he first called his disciples, it was by invitation, not force. He said, "Follow me." He invited them. There was no threat. If a person said, "No, I don't want to follow you," he let it be.

In the story read from the Gospel of Matthew before the sermon, Jesus asked his disciples to go and spread the good news of God's love. He also advised them at the same time that force wouldn't work. He said, "If a 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 giving the same advice 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 life and our human relationships in so many ways. How often we as parents try to force our children rather than lead or guide them. A parent will 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 to stay home when he wanted to leave. He didn't lock the door. Nor did he say, "If you leave home now, don't ever come back. You'll never be welcome here again." To do that would've destroyed their relationship. Most of the time in human relationships, especially, we need patience, loving patience rather than force.

There have been times when one of the partners in a marriage has rushed into my office to tell me that he or she has just found out something about their spouse and wants to take immediate action to force the issue. My usual advice is to not panic, don't force it too quickly. Take time to carefully consider what is the best course of action to take. Otherwise, the person may take some hasty action that could only make matters worse.

Or I've heard parents say with all the force they could 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."

Their hope is that this threat has within it enough force to solve the problem. But it seldom does.

There are so many things in our lives that cannot be forced. Growth, both physical and mental, cannot be forced without doing some harm to the body and the mind. Physical and mental growth can be encouraged, supported, affirmed as a positive goal, celebrated, but it cannot be forced.

In the same way, maturity cannot be forced. Have you ever tried to force someone to be mature? It can be affirmed, encouraged, supported, modeled, but it cannot be forced.

We cannot force seed to grow. We can try to make the environment for growth as good as possible. We can properly water the seed, fertilize it, keep it free from weeds, but we cannot force it to grow.

Belief and faith in God cannot be forced. Again, it can be invited, affirmed, encouraged, and supported, and we can set an example for others with our own faith. We can tell others what our faith has meant to us, how it has changed our lives for the better, how it has undergirded us in the crises we have faced, but no more than that. Jesus never attempted to force anyone to follow him. He gave the invitation, explained the conditions, described the benefits, and then left the decision up to the individual.

We cannot force anyone to attend this church or join it. We can invite people, welcome them, make the environment as friendly and helpful to visitors as possible, try to meet their needs, let them know what this church means to us and to the wider community, invite them to attend the worship services and other programs on a trial basis, and then the decision is up to them.

Some people my age who attended private church-related colleges remember what was called "voluntary-compulsory chapel." In the college I attended, it was voluntary because we could choose the two days out of five for attending chapel services, but it was compulsory in that we had to attend at least two chapel services a week. Attendance was always taken. It was also voluntary to the extent that those who were there sometimes did other things in the worship service — their homework, or read the newspaper, or took a nap. Not too many of the students participated enthusiastically. Religion cannot be forced.

I'm always somewhat amused by those who want to require prayer in public schools. Incidentally, the United States Supreme Court in its decision concerning New York State some years ago did not forbid prayer in public schools. The Court said that the State of New York could not require that a certain prayer which some agency of the state had written be said in the public schools of that state. Any student or teacher in any school can pray privately as many times a day during school hours as that student desires. But the school board, school administration, or any other agency cannot require that a time of prayer be observed.

If prayer in schools could be required, it would make for some interesting conflicts. What kind of prayer would it be? In our diversity, could we agree on what kind of prayer should be said? I can imagine that some high church people might not trust speaking to God in language newer than the King James. Other devout Christians might not like having their prayers said for them by Buddhists in California or Transcendental Meditators in Iowa. In Salt Lake City, some Southern Baptists might get upset when their children came home from school quoting the Book of Mormon. Or maybe the problem could be solved by praying a non-denominational prayer addressed to "whom it may concern."

Faith in God cannot be forced. But it can be taught and caught. I remember one 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 appreciate the value of continued learning. She was also, and equally importantly, 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 her deep faith. She inspired many of her students. She was not afraid of exploring new ideas and of searching for truth. She did not claim to have all the right answers. Yet she spoke simply and directly about her own deep convictions.

Faith in God cannot be forced. It is not transmitted by requiring it. Personally, I don't want any government official or school board, or any government agency at any level to define for me or my children or grandchildren what prayer or what faith in God is.

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 people have argued that the ban on official prayers is to blame for the rise in crime, racial conflict, drug abuse, sexual promiscuity, and the demise of the American family.

No one believes in the power of prayer more than I do, but required or forced prayer is not something I believe in. We certainly need to pray for our schools, our teachers, our administrators, and our political leaders at every level, but we should not expect them to do our praying for us.

Faith in God cannot be forced. Love cannot be forced. We cannot force our children to love us or to love God. Nor does God ever try to force us to love God. Love, by its very nature, has to be freely given and freely received. If you force it, it's no longer love, but something quite different.

God never forces anyone, nor for that matter does God try to impress us with power. One day when Jesus and his disciples had been rejected by a group of people, the disciples wanted Jesus to call on God's power to destroy those people, but Jesus would have none of it. God comes to us in humble, unconditional love. God comes to us and is among us and loves us with gentleness. Jesus said, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you, eat with you, and you with me." Jesus will knock on the door of your life, but he will not use force to break through the door. You have to open it.

One final comment: not to force something does not mean giving up or doing nothing. God never gives up on us. Gentle encouragement, support, setting a good example, waiting for the right time to act, patient persistence — all these are 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.