Sunday, January 21, 2001
DON'T FORCE IT!
Luke 4:14-21

A few weeks ago, in a sermon entitled Returning from Christmas, I said that as you and I return from Christmas and enter this new year, there are some things we need to forget. Today's sermon is connected with that recommendation in this way: leaving some things behind, that is, forgetting them, means not being afraid to question some of our basic assumptions and, in the process, leave some of them behind. That's what Jesus asked his followers to do with some frequency. He also did the same by saying, "You have heard that it was said of old, but I say to you..." and then gave examples. Here's one: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."

Here's another example. In the story read earlier from the gospel named Luke, Jesus had returned from his spiritual retreat in the wilderness where he had gone for 40 days following his baptism by John the Baptist. Luke tells us, "Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the synagogues, and he was praised by everyone. He came to Nazareth where he had been brought up. He went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom." He read to his hometown congregation a passage from Isaiah and then gave them a new way of understanding it. In the process, he was asking them to leave behind an old assumption and consider a new one — namely that he was the fulfillment of that prophecy.

Incidentally, preaching to one's hometown congregation is never easy. You have to choose your words carefully. Those who knew you when you grew up with them remember things that make it hard for them to accept you in a new light. A man from a Nebraska small town who later became a minister remembers being stopped one night by Sergeant Green of the Nebraska State Patrol, who lived in the same small town. He was pulled over for exceeding the speed limit only a few days after getting his driver's license at age 16. The sergeant asked the young man if his dad knew he had the car, commented on the foolishness of what he had done, and began to write a ticket. When Sergeant Green handed him the ticket, he saw that it was a warning. Unbelievable. His parents would never find out. That night, the young man said, he knew with absolute certainty there was a God, a kind and gracious God who watched out for him. Years later, he had to return to that small town and his home church and preach about how he'd come to such strong convictions — especially with Sergeant Green present.

I'm sure there are some subjects for sermons that would not be easy for me to preach on in my hometown church because those listening, who knew me when I was growing up, would have tremendous difficulty in changing some of their assumptions about me.

Leaving behind old assumptions about people and ideas is never easy. Consider this one, which has been around for a long time: the belief that any problem can be solved with enough force. Or, to put it another way, raw power is the answer in almost every situation. Jesus tells us in many of his teachings that this is not true. He taught that there are times when "strong" can be wrong, and "might" does not always make things right. Indeed, applying too much force too quickly can sometimes make matters worse.

Haven't you known situations where "strong" was wrong, when you broke what you meant to fix, when you bruised what you meant to comfort, when you overpowered what you meant to

support? It's always a temptation when you see something not going your way to want to move in with force and take over.

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 from scraps of pipes and used parts. We found two pieces of pipe that we were certain could be used if we could get them apart. They were threaded together with a sleeve and had rusted tight with age.

Since we didn't have a vise or the proper wrench to unscrew the two pieces, we took the pipe to a hardware store where we knew the owner. He was busy with a customer, so he told us to go ahead and use the workshop. In the workshop, we put one end of the pipe into 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 workshop and asked, "Do you want to buy new pipe or use what you have?" He had seen us trying to force the two pieces apart and knew that if we continued to apply too much force, we could damage it. 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, 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 it out of the vise and began patiently and lightly tapping the sleeve which held the two pieces together. Then back to the vise to see if they could be unscrewed, and then back to tapping with the hammer. After a few more minutes, he was able to easily unscrew one piece of pipe from the other without doing any damage.

That was an important lesson: "Don't force it." There are times when "strong" is wrong. There are all kinds of issues in this life that 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 parable. When he first called his disciples, it was by invitation, not force. He said, "Follow me." He invited them. There was no threat, no attempt at coercion. If a person said "No, I don't want to follow you," he let it be.

Later in his ministry, when he sent his disciples to go and proclaim the good news of God's love, he also reminded them 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. 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. Leave that rejection behind, don't carry it with you, and move on.

He 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."

"Don't force it." This applies to our everyday lives. How frequently 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 try to 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 are times when one of the partners in a marriage has rushed into a counselor's office to tell the counselor that he or she has just discovered something about their spouse, and the injured partner wants to take immediate action to force the issue. The counselor will usually advise not to panic, not to force it too quickly. Take time to consider what course of action to take. Hasty action could make the matter worse.

Sometimes parents will 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." Their hope is that this threat has within it enough force to solve the problem.

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

Maturity cannot be forced. Have you ever tried to force someone to be mature? It can be affirmed, encouraged, supported, and modeled. You cannot force a seed to grow. You can improve the environment for growth with fertilizer, proper watering, and good care, but you cannot force it.

Belief and faith in God cannot be forced. Again, it can be invited, affirmed, encouraged, modeled, and supported. You can set an example for others with your own faith by how you live it. You can tell others what your faith has meant to you, how it has changed your life for the better, how it has undergirded you in the crises you have faced, but you cannot force your faith onto another person. Jesus never attempted to force anyone to follow him. He gave the invitation, explained the conditions and benefits, and then left the decision up to the individual.

When Jesus announced in the synagogue in Nazareth that he had come to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, and to let the oppressed go free, he didn't do it with threats of God's vengeance.

How then did he bring good news to the poor or freedom to the oppressed? He would do it, Luke shows, through the persistent befriending of the poor, the outcasts, and the little people of his day, including those who seemed his enemies. He listened to them and ate with them. Some he healed of diseases that were diminishing their lives. Even when he met with opposition, he responded not with threats but with love and patience.

You and I 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.

Faith and trust in God cannot be forced. But it can be taught and caught. I remember one teacher I had when I was in junior high school. 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 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 I, along with other students, could instinctively know 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 answers. Yet she spoke simply and directly about her own deep convictions and treated each one of her students as a unique and precious human being.

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

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

Jesus taught that God never forces anyone, nor does God try to impress us with power. When his disciples had been rejected by a group of people, some of his disciples wanted Jesus to call on God's power to destroy those people, but he would have none of it. God comes to us in humble, unconditional love. 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." He was saying that God is continually knocking on the door of your life, but God will not use force or kick the door in. 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 — remembering that when the pupil is ready, the teacher will appear — all of these are alternatives to force. Then success comes easier, and we're not as likely to break what we meant to fix or bruise what we meant to comfort. Amen.