

I asked some kids once what do you do if you're out on the playground and someone pushes you. They responded, "You push back." They lacked charity but they had honesty. I quoted this Gospel to them. Jesus said it used to be an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a push for a push. But now if someone hits you on one cheek you don't hit back; you offer them the other one too. The kids said to me, "You've got to be kidding."

Children have learned that the proper response to violence is vengeance. Now, where did they learn that? They learn that from their culture. They learn that from us. When we idolize boxers, when we support invasions, when we administer capital punishment, we teach that vengeance is the response to violence.

Here in Missouri, between Kansas City and Jefferson City, there are planted in the earth 150 Minuteman missiles, ready to be launched. Each one has a warhead 100 times more powerful than the bomb which killed 160,000 people in Hiroshima. When you drive across sleepy Missouri, you drive across a nation poised for vengeance. We are ready to fight back with more thunder than Mike Tyson ever dreamed of. It's no wonder that on America's playgrounds, one child pushes back at another.

Jesus preached non-violence. He wasn't alone. Martin Luther King, Mohatma Gandhi, and Dorothy Day did the same. Non-violence works in Poland, East Germany, and the Soviet Union. We can only pray that it will guide the events in South Africa, in our neighborhoods, and in our homes.

Why non-violence? The reason Jesus gives is that sometimes God gets confused. God can't tell good people from bad. The sun shines and the rain falls on good and bad alike. God will recognize good people because when the rain strikes them, they do not strike back. That's the reason for non-violence, so God will know we're the good guys.

Isn't that interesting? Without this information, we might be confused about bad things that happen to us. Some people think bad things happen to them because they are bad people. Jesus says that's not so; bad things happen to good and bad people alike. Does someone you know have AIDS? It doesn't mean they're bad. Did you lose a baby before childbirth? Did someone you love die at the hands of a drunk driver? It doesn't mean you or your friend are bad. You can't tell by the rain because the rain falls on the good and the bad alike. You can tell who's good by their response--it will be non-violent, not vengeful.

Sometimes when the fates mistreat us we feel like God has pushed us on the great playground of life. A typical human response will be to push back--to quit praying, to stop going to Church, to drift away from God, in order to punish God. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a push for a push. But God looks for non-violence, not vengeance.

Vengeance will tempt us all. We can stop it, if we spot it early. When we feel the desire to push back, it's already time to turn the other cheek. Peace will come to the world when peace comes to our own playground.