

The first car I ever owned was a used Volkswagen type 3, a squareback, like a tiny station wagon; you rarely see them on the road any more. The more it deteriorated the more its character grew. It wouldn't start in the rain, and it honked every time I turned left. But one day I took it in for some engine repair and drove it away from the shop convinced that it was working perfectly again. The car sat in the garage overnight, and the next day I got it about 2 miles down the road when the sound coming from the engine changed. It didn't sound worse than it was, it just sounded farther than it was. You see the whole engine of a Volkswagen, not unlike the engine of a DC-10 some years ago, is held in place by 3 or 4 bolts. That's all. My friendly repairman forgot to tighten the bolts and the whole engine slipped from its place in the car to an inch or so from the road. My friendly repairman became even more friendly as he towed the car back and fixed what was newly damaged at no cost to me.

Afterwards, I mentioned this to a lawyer I know who said to me, "You know, we could have got a lot more out of them than that." I was young and innocent at the time, and I said, "Thank you, no. All I want is for my car to work again."

Quite honestly, if it happened to me today, I wonder if I could be that virtuous again. I only hope I could. But all around us people are using the courts to get all they can out of similar situations. We have rights and the courts will support us if we choose to redress an injury. In most conflicts, people still believe in the wisdom of an eye for an eye. When we see people punished for the wrong they have done, we say "they got what they deserve" or "they sure had it coming." Turnabout is fair play.

Jesus abolishes the old law and replaces it with one that says, "Offer no resistance to injury; love your enemies, pray for your persecutors." Jesus admits that there are enemies, and implies that we have a right to make them pay. What he asks is that we waive that right for the benefit of others. He wants us to imitate God who loves his friends and enemies so equally that he lets the sun shine and the rain fall on the good and the bad alike. We'd like God to show a little more partiality, giving us better weather than those folks on your block who never go to church on Sunday, but God loves them, too. Maybe there are days he'd like to show some revenge, but he loves perfectly.

"Offer no resistance to injury" is one of the principles which guided a controversial pastoral letter of the American bishops called, "The Challenge of Peace." In that letter the bishops condemned the use of nuclear arms. They said that the mass indiscriminate destruction of innocent life which would come from a nuclear attack is morally unjustifiable even in retaliation. That means that if Moscow destroyed Raytown it would be wrong for us to destroy Leningrad. Many people disagree; they say "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a town for a town." Jesus says, "Offer no resistance to injury; love your enemies, pray for your persecutors."

I admit that this Gospel is very hard to live, especially if you have suffered some personal injury and desire revenge. Jesus calls us to probe what it means to say we imitate the love of God.