The Holy Sticker Chart

A Homily on Forgiveness, Reconciliation, and Hope

My family is currently practicing the art of the sticker chart.

I learned from the eight o'clock service that this may be a parenting phenomenon that goes back to the '80s. It's that if you do this action that we would like you to do, you get a sticker. If you get so many stickers, then in my family, you get a gently used little car to add to your collection of hundreds.

We're also in the phase of learning what numbers mean and feel like, and so any number over ten requires patience and trying hard. The hope is that by the time my child reaches that car several times, his behavior will have been changed. That which originally felt hard at the beginning of the sticker chart now feels like second nature.

Although I've read today's Gospel many times before, the sticker chart is what I could not get out of my head.

Jesus, last week, had just spoken about what reconciliation looks like in Christian community. Peter's follow-up to those instructions is where we start today. He asks Jesus, "How many times do I need to forgive someone?"

Jesus answers, "Seventy-seven," or, in some translations, seven times seventy - like we just heard sung - 490 times. With either translation, Jesus is saying: a lot.

Jesus' answer sounds like a holy sticker chart to me. Just do it once, then repeat, then repeat that, and when you get to 77 or 490, whichever, check in with me. In the doing, in the forgiving, you may lose track of your count. In the doing, you will be changed, and hopefully the act of forgiveness will feel at least a little easier.

If these instructions are not enough, Jesus continues with a parable.

Now, parables are not allegories where it's supposed to be: this person represents this person, this person represents that other person. They are simple stories with a hint of strangeness, meant to point to God's nature and God's kingdom. We're supposed to hold them alongside our lives and wonder where they are speaking right now - and that may change whenever you are reading them.

Today's parable does feel a little prickly. There's torture at the end, and it is also hyperbolic. What the first enslaved person owes is more than a lifetime of wages. It is the stuff of billionaires today. There was never any chance that he was going to pay back this debt, and he is forgiven.

Yet he does not extend the same generous forgiveness to his fellow human being. His community calls him out on it, and he receives punishment.

It is meant to shock us into wondering: Who are we in this parable? It invites us to wonder: Where are we needing to extend forgiveness? Where are we needing to offer forgiveness and ask for it? And who is our community that calls us out when we may not get it right?

I want to say in clear terms that Jesus is not telling anyone to stay in an abusive situation. As I mentioned earlier, this passage directly follows instructions on reconciliation in community. The reconciliation process involves letting someone go if they cannot change after the community process. There may still be forgiveness at that point, but it does not mean keeping the status quo if it leads to the same act. It may be forgiveness at a distance.

And forgiveness does not mean denying hurt or immediately squashing your emotions. It does not mean forgetting.

Forgiveness that is easy for God is not easy for us, even though it's essential to our faith. In some ways, I find putting words to what forgiveness is tricky because I feel like Peter, full of questions and not sure at times what to do. But I do know forgiveness means letting go, and for me, it's often felt slow - or at least slower than I want it to.

And as much as Jesus is concerned with our individual actions as followers of faith, he is also concerned about our communal actions - who we are as a faith community in the world. Today's Gospel is as much about how we respond and forgive as it is about continuing holy and healthy community.

For me, that is hard to imagine without looking at history.

I want to send a shout-out to all teachers, because the story I'm going to tell you is from sixth grade, and it's because of a teacher who taught me quite a bit.

All sixth graders at my middle school were assigned a World War II project, and it felt like it was the whole year, but it was probably about two months. We were

each given an individual project within that context, and I was paired with a gentleman from my community.

He was an American with Japanese ancestry who had been imprisoned in the Japanese internment camps during World War II. He generously shared his story with me at a time in which I didn't know how to interview people, and encouraged me to continue to learn more after our conversation.

These camps were authorized by then-President Franklin Roosevelt in 1941 after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Most people imprisoned were American citizens or residents with legal status. Those who had legal status but not citizenship most likely didn't because of our anti-Asian immigration policies at the time that prohibited them from citizenship. The only way to get it at that point if you were Asian was to be born in the country.

All of those people were rounded up one day and moved to internment camps without most of their possessions, leaving behind their housing, leaving behind so much of their lives and histories. Families were forced to live in small barracks. Their communities were surrounded by barbed-wire fence, and they ate in mess halls. They ate rations.

Possessions during that time were stolen. And what was also stolen was a sense of safety and well-being, and that hope for the future that many of us take for granted. It is a shameful part of our nation's history.

It took 40 years and many tireless people to challenge our country's leaders, including a lost Supreme Court case, but they kept going. On August 10, 1988, the Civil Liberties Act became law. This act included a tax-free award of $20,000 to all those who survived internment camps and an official apology.

The president at the time, Ronald Reagan, stated: "No payment can make up for those lost years. What is most important in this bill has less to do with property than honor. For here we admit wrong."

One of the people active in leading the case for the apology in front of our country's imagination was Fred Korematsu. He responded: "No money can compensate, but an apology is appropriate. The greatness of a country lies in how it treats the weak. An apology is one way of making sure this never happens to anyone ever again."

The greatness of a country lies in how it treats the weak.

There is much that our nation does not apologize for, and we are living in a time in which our country's president does not hold or uphold values of reconciliation, apology, forgiveness, or the loving treatment of the weak.

And I chose this story when I was struggling with forgiveness not to ignore all that is hard and unjust now, not to ignore that this was an imperfect process of reconciliation - but it was reconciliation all the same.

I chose this story to share that we can be a nation that moves toward reconciliation again; to be reminded that following Jesus means practicing forgiveness, repentance, and reconciliation within our communities. It means that we are called to work for neighborhoods, cities, states, and countries whose actions are in line with these values.

I chose this story because the times feel dark. It reminds me to hope. Hope in a God who calls us to live in a community with love at its center.

Where we start is with that first sticker.

Forgive once. Or ask to be forgiven once.

Do this, and then do it again and again.

And that is what following Jesus looks like.