

A couple of weeks ago Andy Dejka (“Day-ka”) came back to Holy Family for a visit. Andy had been our Evangelization and Young Adult Minister. He left a year ago to return to his home state of Nebraska, where he now works with the Archdiocese of Omaha. Andy brought his one-year-old daughter Gemma with him when he visited the office. Gemma is just learning to walk, and so it was fun watching her explore the office. This is probably not the proper image for a baby, but she moved sort of like a little drunken person staggering down the hallway. Gemma would take these jerky little steps, arms outstretched, lurching from side to side, as she made her way towards my office, which seemed to fascinate her. Along the way she would periodically teeter and fall, sometimes on her bottom, sometimes frontward on her hands. She let out little yelps, but just picked herself back up and kept moving. I was amused and impressed by her perseverance.

“A man had two sons. He came to the first and said, ‘Son, go out and work in the vineyard today.’ He said in reply, ‘I will not,’ but

afterwards he changed his mind and went.” A little context for this parable in Matthew 21: the day before Jesus told this parable to the chief priests and elders He had cleansed the Temple by driving out the money-changers. Now the Temple authorities are questioning Jesus, basically saying, “Who do you think you are?” Jesus makes a deal with them. He says, “I’ll tell you who I am, if you tell me if you think John the Baptist was a prophet or not.” They refuse because the people do believe John was a prophet and repented of their sins, but the authorities had rejected him. They’re afraid to openly contradict the crowd. So now Jesus uses this parable where He eventually reveals that sinners such as prostitutes and tax collectors are entering the Kingdom of Heaven, and the authorities are not. The authorities talk a good game, but they don’t produce fruit of repentance, so they ultimately reject the Father’s offer of love like the second son in the parable.

Today I want to point out how patient with His children Jesus portrays the Father as being in this parable. When the first son rejects

His direction to work in their family vineyard the Father allows that defiance of Him to take place. He loves all His children, even the ones who tell Him “No” to His face. And here I think of all of us sinners who tell God “No” when we sin. When we knowingly act against God’s commandments we are that first son. But the Father, allowing that freedom to us, doesn’t zap us. He is waiting for us, hoping we’ll repent and head out to the vineyard. Late is better than never.

And here I want to come back to Gemma and her attempts to walk. She is still learning to walk. And that’s what we’re doing in the spiritual life. We are still just learners – and often not very advanced learners. Every time we sin we fall. And we stumble and fall often.

But the question is what do we do when we fall? How many of us become depressed and discouraged when we sin over, and over, again? Maybe it’s some compulsive sin, drinking, drugs, pornography, maybe it’s anger, gossip, or lying. Or it might be our omissions, when we fail in the good practices we promise God we’ll do. But whatever it is, it can

get to the point that we feel like hypocrites making God any more promises. We end up feeling like both, the second son, who doesn't follow through, as well as the first son who openly defies the Father!

But when we're feeling like spiritual failures, remember, the Father doesn't want to zap us. He is patient, like the owner of the vineyard. He's waiting to see if, after our sin, we'll keep trying. Think of Andy, Gemma's loving father, and me, and several of the parish staff, that day watching from above as Gemma struggled down that hallway step by step. That is what God is like. He looks at us lovingly. He doesn't love our sin, of course, but He loves our desires to stop sinning, to do better – even when we fail.

That image of Gemma should inspire us when we're feel stuck in our sinfulness. Gemma was always falling, hurting a little, but picking herself back up, determined to get to her destination. We can do the same thing. If the prostitutes and tax collectors did it, why can't we? Do you think none of them ever sinned again after that day repenting to

John the Baptist at the Jordan? And Jesus still praised them! So, keep making those good resolutions that haven't panned out yet. Don't give up on the hope of growing in the spiritual life. We should renew our good resolutions to break free from sin, even if we suspect that we aren't yet strong enough to succeed completely.

Which of the two sons are we more like? The one who talks a good game, but who doesn't follow through – and who ultimately fails the Father? Or are we more in the position of the first son, who has said “no” to God, but whose conscience and love for the Father are still working, and so can eventually motivate him to get up and go out into the vineyard after all? Most of us are both. We're just little saints-in-training, just learning to walk. Wouldn't it be horrible if we never tried to walk on our own, or if, after we've fallen, we just remain on our bottoms and never do learn to walk in the Spirit? Let us impress the loving Father with our perseverance. Saints aren't people who never fall. They're people who get right back up after a fall -- and start again.