

Sounding out the words

Our younger son comes running to find me with a book.

“Will you read with me?” he asks. It’s an irresistible invitation, and he knows it. I stop what I’m working on, and we climb onto the couch together.

He studies the first word and then reads it aloud. He reads the next one, and then the next one. But soon enough, he is stuck. I sit and watch and wait as he tries to sound it out.

It’s a tough one, and so I try to figure out when I should intervene. I want him to feel the thrill of figuring the word out himself. I also don’t want him to struggle with it so much that he tosses the book onto the floor and leaves, discouraged.

So I slowly offer the first syllable and then the second. Then, when I know he’s still not seeing it, I finish the word.

He seems relieved, and we continue our slow progress along the page.

Reading doesn’t come easily for our second grader. He has dyslexia, so reading is particularly challenging for him. But I love that he wants to read. I am so grateful that, even though reading is a battle he has to fight, he is still excited to read a story with words that are much too long and with way too many syllables.

I used to worry that it would be hard for him to succeed. Now I watch him meet challenges head on and wonder whether he might actually be better prepared for the world as a result. He doesn’t expect school to be easy. He knows he has to spend longer on his work. He isn’t afraid to ask for help.

As we sit and read, I think – as I have so many times – how hard it is to watch him struggle. I want to jump in and just read the story. I want to give him the answers. I also know, however, that I can’t do the learning for him. I need to let him learn and grow. He’s the one in the driver’s seat. I’m merely here to help him navigate, if I can.

As with so many parenting moments, it reminds me of God’s relationship with me.

He must watch me sometimes and marvel at how I can make the same mistakes over and over without learning to do things differently. He must wonder at how I fumble around asking him for guidance that he gives through gentle nudges and I ignore.

But maybe God rejoices at every one of my small achievements. Maybe it doesn't trouble him that I make so many bad choices, time and again. Maybe he looks at me with the eyes of a parent and sees the successes more than the failures. Maybe he watches me struggle with pride, love and faith that I will keep trying, and that I may improve.

That's how I am with our son. As we move slowly through the book, I am astounded at every word he recognizes. Each word he reads with ease feels like a miracle. He's reading! He still has so much to learn, but he's light years ahead of where he was a year ago, or even six months ago. It has taken a team of people who support him, and I am so very thankful for them. But when I sit beside him and hear his voice sounding out the words, I am in awe of how far he has come.

For our son to learn to read is taking a dedication, a hunger and a deep determination that I know I never had at 8. He stumbles through the pages, but he keeps trying. Isn't that how we all are on our journeys as Christians?

"We are not the sum of our weaknesses and failures," said St. John Paul II. "We are the sum of the Father's love for us."

How wonderful that, even when life isn't easy and we struggle to be all we can be, our Father is watching us with a divine love that is beyond understanding.