

When Grace Blindsides You in Unexpected Ways

My husband Matt and I decided to be foster parents long before we were married. I had never met a man who would excitedly talk about fostering and adoption while being “just friends.” Clearly God created Matt, and I completely fell in love with this man who wasn’t afraid to live differently.

He wasn’t deterred by the unusual life that choosing these ministries would bring. I knew marrying him would mean we could live out domestic missions boldly together and hopefully move others to choose it too.

By the time we were engaged, we knew we had to be married at least two years through our chosen adoption agency before we could adopt. We only had to wait one year of marriage in order to be licensed foster parents. And womb babies? That wasn’t a question. We were never going to delay the timing of those precious gifts, either. God was planting something special in our hearts so that we would choose foster care first.

We found out through our multiple five-hour foster care *home study interviews* that adoption would have to be a separate time of our lives, as you cannot foster while you are adopting. I was disappointed, but it made sense with the separate goals of each ministry and sensitivity to the children’s needs. We trusted that God was leading our new family.

2014 was by far one of the most favorite years of my life. We became foster parents! And I finally got great use out of the red van Matt bought me for Valentine’s Day our first year of marriage. “If you buy a van, they will come,” Matt said with a grin. *Boy, did they.* Three beautiful little girls came and went in August alone, and our first little boy started

transitioning into our home a little while later.

Our first little girl was just about to turn 7 years old. We only had her for a short respite period before a planned transition to another “long-term” home. I was clearly nervous about my very first time to be a foster mom. I remember unpacking her suitcase and asking about her favorite foods she liked to eat.

She looked at me and asked, “Are you *really* a foster mom?” I was puzzled by her question. Then I realized, compared to her past foster mom, I probably looked like a babysitter. I nodded slowly, “You’re our first child ever. I’m new at this.” She smiled and assured me, “Don’t worry. I’ll help you.”

She explained to me that in public she wanted to call me “Mom” and call Matt “Dad” so she didn’t have to answer any questions. She just wanted to feel normal. I found out after she left that most children in care do the same from a very young age. Some children do this because of a deep desire for permanency; some just say it in order to avoid the questions that kids and adults, alike, will ask you without thinking about privacy invasion.

Speaking of privacy, that is why children in care will receive a nickname on social media; real first names are kept private. You’ll also notice that foster families don’t show children in care’s faces on social media pictures. This ensures their privacy is protected while including them in our family’s everyday joy and celebrations.

She eased us into foster care with such grace, we’ll call her “Grace.” Grace was such a gift to us—and even taught us about the beauty of reunification. I got an unexpected call one afternoon from her biological mother saying, “We have an order that we can pick up my daughter! I have custody ... I just really want to see my daughter! (Sobbing) ... I’m sorry” I was absolutely stunned. My head was spinning.

The joy in this mother's voice was undeniable, and I could barely hear her words through her tears. Tears streamed down my face and a flood of heat ran through my body. I remember massaging my chest over my heart from that very moment until long after her mother picked her up. I couldn't even tell you how I felt; I didn't know. It was a swarm of: "Is this a good thing?" "Oh, the sound of that mom's joy and relief," "How will Grace feel?" "Is this really OK?" "Oh Jesus, please, let this be a good thing."

I'm not going to sugarcoat it and tell you I had this beautiful peace. I didn't. I felt intense pain, worry and stress. *How was Grace?* I've never seen her smile and yell that much out of sheer excitement. She was finally going home after over two long years in foster care. I couldn't help crying for the pain and then smiling for her joy. Waiting for her mom and family to pick her up, Grace climbed into my lap and held me. I told her, "I'm so happy for you!"

But I was terrified of the unknown. She told me, "I love you." She was trying to comfort me while her dream was about to come true. She had prayed with me every morning and every night for her family, and now answered prayers unfolded before us. It was beautiful to watch, painful to feel and many messy unknowns right in the middle of this epic thing called *reunification*.

Finally the car pulled up. Her mom hugged me and said, "I just love the way you do her hair. You can come and fix her hair whenever you want." I stopped massaging my heart for a moment and saw the love in her mom's eyes for me. She didn't have to say that, but she did.

When you are going through classes for foster care, one of the things you learn is: Prepare to not be liked by the child or by the biological family. In fact, expect to not be liked at all. You're the stranger. You are the unfamiliar place they have to stay. You are the family that has their child and they

don't.

Having Grace love us the way she did and having her mom offer a kind word of comfort—that was a miracle. Jesus was showing me that things can be different than expected. This foster life isn't neat and tidy. It's a big ol' mess. But sometimes when you walk in love, some love will come right back at you.

After Grace, we had two little loves: a 2-year-old and her little sister only 8 months old. *Oh, was this an adventure:* juggling two at a time, both 2 years and under. They would be staying for a short respite, as well. There was one all-nighter with the 8-month baby girl. She was so sick and Matt and I traded through the night. I remember after trying multiple lullabies and a hundred different cradling positions, I gave up trying to relieve her crying and brought her into our bedroom just to sit on the corner of our soft bed.

Matt swiftly took her from my tired arms and went in for the final night-watch in the nursery like a true knight in shining armor. I fell asleep with a deliriously happy smile on my face knowing I have a husband who will take on night-watch. They are rare, folks, and I got one.

Shout-out to all the single foster moms out there. They should create a superhero character in your honor (I'd buy *that* Barbie.) So many of my foster family friends are single foster moms and I think of them every time I *think* I feel tired. There aren't any night-watch reinforcements in their home or preschool pick-up backups. They literally have to make it work while working and keeping up with the rigorous foster care legal schedules. I praise God for the way they love so selflessly. Heaven sees all they do.

After our girls left there were a few children that "almost" came into our home but didn't. Foster cases change quickly; at some point, you will prepare for a certain child or children

and then you will get news that you won't receive them after all. Thus, another reason you will need flexibility.

Then we got a call about our first little boy (who we nicknamed "Sweet B"). Because of the sensitivity of his circumstances, they would be transitioning him into our home slowly instead of right away. To help others comprehend the uncertainty and great loss a child can face before and during care, I will share that he has moved several times since being only 3 years old. That is not the government's fault, not our private agency's fault, not any past foster parents' fault; and it is most definitely not his fault.

When a child has been through trauma and continues to go through trauma, developmental and behavioral needs will occur. In foster care, instead of saying behavioral "issues" we say behavioral "needs." And that is necessary so that we can begin to understand that it isn't an "issue" like we so naturally call it. It's a behavior produced from an unfulfilled need.

A child's developmental or behavioral repercussions all stem from real needs. Our little boy had lots of needs and it would take a lifetime to answer them all. In this case, they wanted him to enter a childless foster home able to adopt him—so permanency could happen if the court so decided. At that point, we learned there was such thing as "fostering-to-adopt." There is a reason we didn't know it existed: It's not common.

Fostering-to-adopt happens only in rare cases. Anyone praying about fostering should *not* choose to foster in order to adopt. I know families who have fostered for over 14 years without ever having the opportunity of adopting a child that came into their home. Fostering-to-adopt is a God thing and we were blessed with this unexpected gift.

Even saying yes to this opportunity does not mean the end result will be that he is our legal son "full and clear."

Remember, he has a family with extended family who can all have a say in this process. We have to maintain being a safe place that is flexible and uphold the understanding that reunification is on the table, even when it is horrifying for us to imagine.

I love to share how my husband and Sweet B re-opened my eyes to the true Father heart of God. I love hearing him say, "Daddy, Daddy, look!" I listened from the next room and felt how badly our children in care want permanency. They so deeply desire for us to be their real Mommy or Daddy ... not foster. And so do I, I'm not going to lie. I'm for reunification for families *and* I want to be their momma. When they call us "Mommy" and "Daddy," part of my heart soars and the other part aches.

And then I heard Matt answer him in a way he never had before: "What is it, son?" I stood in the next room stunned. I want to say that as much as anyone in this whole world, but fostering is unpredictable so I try to keep things "safe." I try to protect them by saying things like, *What is it, love?* or *What, baby?* But you know the part that really got me? I asked Matt why he said that to him. And Matt told me, "Well, I thought he might have never heard a man call him that in return before."

It's true. He has never met nor knows anything of his biological dad. I doubt any man has called him "son" in his life. And I don't understand the theology behind why, but all I could think when Matt said this was: *God, You really do love me! I'm Your child. You're a really good Father and You love me!* That revelation has wrecked me for months now.

I cry when I remember that moment because I was given a glimpse of God's heart to be our Dad. And He calls us "son." That is another piece of why we do foster care. We were taken in by a loving Father. He wants us to do the same.

You know what Sweet B told me he wants to be when he grows up?

He said he wants to be “a Daddy.” And I know that’s because he is experiencing the love of a father and it’s real. Matt may be a foster dad but don’t say that to our little boy. He gets the real thing from us and so will all of our foster loves. We understand legally we may never have the same last name, but all of them are Brumfields to us. There is no secondhand love in our household.

Yet, when we are told to, we must be ready to hand over our children. They are given to us for a time and it’s our opportunity to love, share in their pain, and uplift their lives with the love that truly sustains us: Jesus. If we do nothing else, introducing this Love will impact their lives forever.

Ephesians 3:14-19 perfectly sums up my prayer for every life that passes through or remains in our home:

“When I think of all this, I fall to my knees and pray to the Father, the Creator of everything in heaven and on earth. I pray that from his glorious, unlimited resources He will empower you with inner strength through his Spirit. Then Christ will make his home in your hearts as you trust in him.

Your roots will grow down into God’s love and keep you strong. And may you have the power to understand, as all God’s people should, how wide, how long, how high, and how deep his love is. May you experience the love of Christ, though it is too great to understand fully. Then you will be made complete with all the fullness of life and power that comes from God.”

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