THEN

She was 7. *She had seen more than a 30 year old.* She loved horses*. Horses made her forget about the pain.* She was excited to be turning 8 soon – she would have her very first Birthday party with friends, food, gymnastics, and decorations in bright pink & zebra stripes. *No one had celebrated her before.* On her special day as the cake was brought out, she beamed with joy and gulped the biggest breath of air to blow out her candles as the chorus of “Happy Birthday” had just begun. *She didn’t know you can wait until after the singing. She didn’t know she got a Birthday wish.* She needed a home – a safe place to be where she would have food to eat, a clean place to sleep without all the spiders, and people to love her.

He just turned 12. He was her brother. *He thought of himself as the caretaker because until recently, he was in charge of his family.* He was told things would be better in foster care with healthy food to eat, a warm house, a bed, and a family that did things together. They instructed him to “just be a kid.” *He was untrusting because this sounded too good to be true, he felt frustrated because he didn’t even know what it meant to be a kid - no one had looked after him before, and he had bigger things on his mind like the bills for that month and food (he hadn’t hunted in weeks.)* His eyes looked sad and he was quiet but found the courage to ask each day what would be for dinner and seemed excited no matter what it was. *Bad memories of feeling hungry flooded his mind and his uncertainty troubled him.* He wanted a family to love him, but was afraid, like everything else in his life, that it wouldn’t last. He needed to be cared for and loved.

These were our first two foster children, then. We had just completed the foster license process and were very eager to receive our first placement. My husband and I had been married almost 14 years and had three wonderful children: two biological daughters and an adopted Guatemalan son. We were all ready for one more to love. We had talked about it for the past year, prayed about it, gone through the PRIDE classes, and survived tough questions from some family and friends about “why foster care.” As we looked around the dinner table each night and pictured what it would feel like to have that last spot filled, we knew in our hearts that we were ready, and we would give our all to one more child. The day after my 35th Birthday, we got the call! Not only was that last spot at our dinner table going to be filled, but we had another chair to *find* because our placement had a sibling, and there was no way that we were going to split up siblings.

We were bombarded with so many questions! *Why did you accept a child older than your oldest? I thought you only wanted one foster child! Aren’t you worried about sexual abuse? Aren’t most foster kids sexually abused? You’re having your kids share a room? Did you budget for this? That boy is almost as tall as you, aren’t you scared? How will this affect your children? Have you thought about YOUR kids?* Thankfully, these mostly well intended yet invasive questions were the worst of it, and we were also bombarded with tons of love and support. A friend cooked us a meal since I had never cooked for a large family before and was more than a little intimidated by it. Our parents asked what things the kids needed and picked up items each child could call their own with no thanks needed. Our licensing agency (LCCC) checked in with us and gave us advice, tips, and resources when we needed it. Our school rallied around us in prayer and encouragement – we just saw blessings everywhere!

TIME WENT BY.

She began sleeping through the night and having sweet dreams. She started eating healthier and staying at the table with us. If we moved towards her to pat her back or hug her, she wasn’t saying “ow!” before she was touched. She read us stories that were special to her. She made friends. She giggled often, hugged generously, and made happy pictures for us. She called us mama and daddy and told us what she was thankful for each day.

He struggled in school but let us help him. We began doing a devotional together and he asked what things meant. He gained confidence and began believing us when we told him how smart, brave, and creative he was. He started laughing, and it was the best laugh. All his teachers said they’ve never seen someone try harder. He loved playing with toys when he thought no one was looking. He wrote letters to me when he couldn’t say the words, and he addressed them “mom.” He was always eager to help and had such patience for teaching the little kids how to do something he felt was important. He was happier.

I firmly believe that the most amazing things in life are not going to be easy, but when it is God’s will for you, there will be a way, and that way will be blessed. And blessed we were. God had shown us countless times that when we stepped out in faith for Him (committing to foster care and taking in two of His children instead of one) He had already gone before us, and He would not leave us or forsake us (Deuteronomy 31:8.) We felt comforted and had all we needed in this new life we were living. At mealtime the kids prayed a bit differently; “God thank you for giving us all we need like food on the table, a roof over our head, and people to love us. Please be with the other kids in the world that are alone and don’t have those things.” Our hearts swelled the first time our foster kids volunteered to pray, and the first time we heard them walking around the house singing a song about how God loves them. These are gifts we never would have known to ask for, but they are the best ones we’ve ever been given.

Having foster children will change your life, for the better. Hearing your foster son or daughter call you “mom” will set your heart ablaze with joy because you’ve put in the time with them, you’ve provided that stability and met their basic needs, you’ve been with them in the trenches of heartache, and you’ve loved them through it and accepted their brokenness. After all, we are all broken, but we also have a good God that uses our brokenness and weakness for His good and turns it into strength! (2 Corinthians 12:9.) If we are to be His church like the Bible says, His hands and feet, then we need to seek out the sick, poor, and orphaned with the strength of God in us. We CAN change the world. Our family has been impacted by our foster kids, and so has the extended family, and our friends, and even people we meet only briefly along the way. A small act of obedience for God CAN make a big kingdom impact. There are children waiting now in need of care and love. In Michigan alone on any given day, there are 13,000 children waiting to know love! It is not enough for us to know this and do nothing. We need to do something! If not us, then who?

The Bible reminds us in James 1:27 to look after orphans and widows. It’s hard to think of an accomplishment that fills you up more than this. Children are born into this world each day, but not all parents can care for them. God gives us the opportunity to give a child hope! Through the process, you grow and change into a better version of yourself too. I have always struggled with worrying too much about what I look like to others; am I doing good enough, did I say the right thing, etc. So it felt like a devastating blow when my 7 year old foster daughter began telling my friends and her teachers that I wasn’t feeding her. This was not at all true, of course, but I was a wreck feeling like my character was under attack. Though many tears were shed, and my foster daughter was sorry for acting this way, God used this as a teaching moment for me to not focus on what things look like to others or what other people may think. He reminded me to stay focused on what is right, especially what He tells us in the Bible, and to lean on Him. Oh if only I could have had a smaller, less public lesson! I thank God though, because a huge weight of useless worry was removed from my shoulders through this, and my mind was cleared to focus on His mission and how I can help impact His kingdom by loving this little girl who was simply hurting and testing her limits.

Many people wonder, “will we have enough love?” or “will we be able to love these kids like our other kids?” The simple answer to both is YES, without a doubt! I think of the book How The Grinch Stole Christmas. The Grinch goes through a huge transformation at the end where his heart literally grows 3 sizes in one day. When you accept a foster child into your home and begin caring for them, get ready for your own Grinch-like moment. It is coming, and it is awesome. Your heart doesn’t need to make room to love more, it just somehow grows bigger.

So give love! Give it freely and often and generously! When we do this, it pleases God, and we are blessed with riches that will last an eternity and not just a lifetime. Ask a foster child, any age, what they want most and you will hear this answer: “a family to love me.” That’s all they need. It is so simple. You don’t need to be rich, you don’t need a big home, you don’t need to be married, you don’t need a large supply of toys, what you need is a heart that is willing to give love to the least of these (Matthew 25:40.) God lets us share this wonderful gift of love that He first gave us (1 John 4:19) with a child who is in desperate need of it. Gifts are meant to be shared! Give love generously, and you will receive love generously and unconditionally.

The big question many ponder is, “Why do foster care?” Instead, ask yourself, “why SHOULDN’T I do foster care?” If it’s been on your mind, it’s probably been in your heart, and this could be God prompting you to step out in faith for Him. This is the same God that let Peter walk on water, the same God who made the sun stand still for Joshua, the God who created the heavens and the earth, and the God who sent His one and only Son to die on a cross so we could share everlasting life with Him (John 3:16.) He has blessed this mission to look after orphans. Say yes to His prompt. Say yes to a child. Say yes to giving love. No one has ever become poor by giving.

NOW

She is reunited with her family. She loves horses and sees them daily. She excels in school, she smiles and sings, and writes wonderful stories. We Skype with her often. She was with us for 9.5 months. She is happy and cared for. She is loved.

He is united with his dad. He left here knowing God. He does well in school, likes a girl, smiles often, and his eyes are filled with ideas and light. We thought for a while that we’d be adopting him, but God had a bigger plan. God wanted us to be a family with this boy and his father too. We see them at least once a month. We spend almost all holidays together. He shares his report card with us and calls us when he has a successful hunt. He was with us for 6 months. He is happy and cared for. He is loved.

Our family is still growing. We had another sibling group with us for 4.5 months, and I could fill a book with all that they added to our family. Currently, we’re waiting for the placement of a sibling group that we’ll have the opportunity to adopt. But whether biological, adopted, fostered, or otherwise, I know in my heart that we are ALL a family; all 11 of us and counting. We are a motley, and we are a mess, but it’s a beautiful mess because at the center of it is a whole lot of love. That love comes from God. We can’t wait to see what He has in store for us next! What is He speaking to you about? Fostering? Adopting? Mentoring? Volunteering? I pray for your boldness to answer His call.

Laura, wife of a strong Christian man, mom to some super loveable kids, and daughter of Our Loving Father