

What being an adoptive mother is teaching me about love

By Liz Sprinkle

Having children teaches us so much about God's unconditional love! Any mother will tell you that. When we adopted our son, Sensi, almost two years ago, that understanding grew even deeper.

My adoption experience has forced me to rethink the biblical imagery. A friend and fellow adoptive parent recently told me: "Adoption is like sausage: everybody loves it. Nobody wants to know what goes into it." I have to agree with him; our adoption journey has been full of unexpected difficulties and disappointments. A steep learning curve, to say the least, but perhaps I'm on the upswing.



Sensi was eight, living in an orphan care facility in Ethiopia, at our first meeting. From his profile, we knew he was non-verbal, physically weak, emotionally delayed and developmentally challenged. On our initial visit, he spent most of the time with his face buried in the couch, showing no indication that he desired our company or presence. In other words, he did not reach out for our affection. And, to be completely honest, there was little about him that justified our love. Except that he was a child who needed to be loved, and we decided to love him.

After our time in the orphanage, we went to the Ethiopian court to sign the documents before the judge. With a few swift formalities, Sensi became our son. Officially. Forever. The feeling was surreal. It was not something Sensi earned or asked for; we chose him. And he will always be our son, just as our biological daughters will always be our daughters. Officially. Forever.

In the weeks between signing the papers and bringing Sensi home, I had so many doubts and fears. I knew I was bound to him and would fulfill that duty, but could I love him? [break]

Truthfully, the questions continued after Sensi came home. Hearing other stories of adoption—that they loved them the minute they set eyes on them; that they never had a shadow of a doubt—only added to my struggle. I did not bubble over for my adopted son. I didn't love him as much as I loved Claire and Margot. I didn't have the motherly bond with him that I developed for my girls. Sure, I would give him shelter, food, and security as my son, but wasn't there something more?

At first I felt incredibly guilty about this lack of feeling, but over time I guess I've come to see it as part of our particular story. And that has made me wonder about God's love for me.

Scripture says we are adopted into God's family (Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:6). Pre-Sensi, I considered this metaphor a glossy picture of God's love. Since bringing Sensi into our family, I've realized adoptive parents are not always overwhelmed with emotion. "Is this true of God?", I wondered. Is He just content to care for my needs because He is a good God who keeps His promises, rather than a delighted Father? Is He just happy to make room in heaven for me, rather than cover me in Fatherly affection?

Recently, however, God has been showing me more. More about how this adoption picture works. Although Sensi has come a long way in the last two years (he now makes eye contact, uses three-word phrases, even laughs and plays with his sisters if he's in the mood) he is still shackled in a self-focused, silent world. Occasionally, though, Sensi will share some joy with me—a picture he has drawn; a song he wants to hear. Or he'll initiate an act of love: a spontaneous hug; an "I love you, Mom"; or the one time he looked at me and said, "You ok?"—and something within me nearly exploded.

What I realized was that when Sensi chooses to share even the tiniest part of his heart with me, my delight in him skyrockets. His desire, however small, to share in our relationship transforms my *commitment* love (i.e., dutiful and official) for him into a true, give-and-take, *delighted* love.

And maybe that's how it is with God. He loves us, no question, but when we choose to spend time with Him, when we trust Him and rest ourselves in Him, when we treat Him like a Father, He is right there delighting to give and take back with us. He wants to have a shared and interactive relationship with us. He longs for it. And He will reward the smallest initiation from us with love and more love.

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