

Not too long ago someone remarked to me how “dog” is “God” spelt backwards because dogs are one of the ways we get a glimpse of God here on earth. And having been blessed with Kirby and Emmett, I have to agree. The look into the eyes of your dog results in a feeling of love that I suspect will be very similar to the what we experience in heaven; it’s an unconditional love of peace and joy.

Sure, every so often a dog can pose a challenge, but we choose to welcome a dog into our homes because we know of the profound love that is there. I’ll never forget the day Kirby jumped up on me the first day I met him, or how Emmett when he came into the house the first time came right over to me. I just knew then and there that things would work out.

But while we choose a pet at the breeder or rescue agency, with families, well, we play the hand we are dealt. And as we all know, sometimes people can be a bit more complex than our furry friends, and family life can get pretty complicated.

Janette Leveille is someone who like most all of us has experienced the challenge of family, and in her case it was trying to deal with her aging mother who could be pretty difficult.

One evening, she rushed to her mother’s apartment at the assisted living facility with her husband, Kevin, after one of the nursing assistants had found ger on the floor beside her bed, dazed. She told her mom that they had to go to the ER.

Her 92-year-old mother pressed her lips together in a thin line—an expression of defiance Janette knew all too well. “I don’t need to go to the hospital,” she said. “I just lost my balance.”

Janette tamped down her frustration. She wanted so badly to be a good daughter. Patient. Kind. Full of grace. But not much was easy with her mom. Her mom behaved like a stubborn middle child even as an adult. Sandwiched between a favored older sister and an adorable baby brother, she’d learned to push back and act out to get attention. But couldn’t she see the huge bruises that were forming on her arms like watercolor splotches? How could Janette convince her she needed help?

“She keeps tapping on the side of the bed or the bathroom counter,” said the nursing assistant. “As if she’s typing words she can’t think of.”

Her mom had worked as an accounting clerk for many years. Her mind must have wandered back to those days. Janette thought perhaps her mom had a urinary tract infection, as sometimes infections caused delirium in the elderly, especially those with Alzheimer’s. Her mom had been diagnosed six years earlier, not long after she’d moved from the pine forests of northern California to the facility near Janette and her husband in the prairies of Illinois. She had lived on her own until she’d lost everything to a house fire. She was a widow, and Janette’s brother had died. Janette now needed to step up and take care of her.

In the beginning, Kevin, her husband, and Janette were relieved that she lived so close by. “I’ll be the perfect daughter,” she thought. She felt guilty that she couldn’t live with them. Their cats might trip her. Kevin and Janette worked long hours and traveled often. But she promised she would be her advocate and her supporter. She would take care of her the way an aging parent deserves to be taken care of.

Day by day, the reality of having Mom so near sank in. She would call us all the time with some small chore or errand that needed to be done.

“Jeanette, do you have any pink thread?”

“No, Mom. Do you need Kevin to go out and get some?”

“Oh, there’s no rush.”

When Kevin arrived at the facility with pink thread, Mom looked up at him. “Oh,” she said, holding up a needle, “I found some.”

Everything was a problem for her mom. The food at the assisted living facility—“The vegetables are overcooked.” The songs they sang at the socials in the dining room—“They’re too old.” The doctors who tried to help her—“They don’t listen.” I was soon overwhelmed. Mom seemed to need more of my time and patience every day. More than I could give. Friends wrote on Facebook, “It’s an honor and a privilege to care for my aging parent.” Was I doing something wrong, Janette thought.

No matter what she did for her, it never felt like enough. She wanted to be the most patient. The most kind. The best possible caregiver. She wanted to be more than Mom had been for her growing up. When her brother and she were little, she had been warm and doting, a mother right out of storybooks. Then she divorced her father—an alcoholic who cheated on her—when Janette was six, later marrying another alcoholic. Unlike my father, who was charming and affable, her stepfather was abusive. He would berate Janette’s brother and her, stomping through the house, yelling and cursing. Mom let him. It felt as if she suddenly didn’t care enough to protect us. Had she done something to deserve this? She was too young to understand the complexities of marriage to an addict. All she knew was that she felt alone and abandoned.

That was decades ago, she reminded herself. She’d long since forgiven Mom for the wrongs of her childhood. She’d made her a part of the family she built with Kevin. Why didn’t she feel honored to care for her as the Bible taught? Why couldn’t she be a better daughter?

Janette looked at her mother, sitting up in her bed at the assisted living facility, her mouth still set in a stubborn line, and took a deep breath. “Mom,” she said, “I’m worried about you because you are confused and you’ve been typing with your hands all day.”

She blinked slowly. “Have I?”

Janette nodded. “I think you might have a UTI. If we don’t take you to the doctor, it could develop into a kidney infection. Would you put on your coat for us?”

By the grace of God, she relented. Kevin and Janette drove her to the hospital, and the three of them sat for more than an hour in the waiting room. They got her in, but had to keep her overnight. Her mom at first said no, but then in a moment of compassion, Janette looked into her mom’s eyes. She recalls her brown eyes seemed enormous behind her glasses; her face, so often fixed in opposition, seemed softer, vulnerable. Janette thought her mom looked how she must have looked as a little girl. Scared. Alone. Afraid of being abandoned. She wanted to do everything in her power to protect her. To shield her from pain. It dawned on her that she’d never felt this way about Mom before. It was as if their roles were reversed, as if she were the mother and her mom were the child.

“They’ll take good care of you,” Janette said. “Kevin will be here first thing in the morning, and I’ll come to see you on my lunch break.”

She took the day off from work the next day to be with her mom, and gave her comfort. As she puts it, this wasn’t about guilt. This wasn’t about obligation. This was about love.

An hour later, the doctor came into Mom’s room and explained she needed surgery on one of her carotid arteries. It was 90 percent blocked. That evening, Kevin and Janette hugged her mom goodbye in her apartment at the assisted living facility. It wasn’t until Janette flopped into her bed that night, exhausted, that she realized the enormity of her devotion to her mom over the past 30 hours. She thought of something her friend Dee had told her when she was taking care of her father-in-law at the end of his life. “There’s no place for guilt in caregiving. All the things you do for your loved one—that’s what really matters.”

Janette says if she could forgive Mom for not being a perfect parent when she was a kid, she could forgive herself for not being the perfect daughter and caregiver now. She’d been doing her best to support her, not just for the past 30 hours but for the past six years. She prayed, “Lord, however many more years you give me with Mom, I’ll be beside her. She let go of the idea that the only good caregiver is a perfect one. What she do for her mother is enough. So is she.

All of us have people like Janette’s mom in our families. And all of us have families that are complicated. I suspect even Mary and Joseph had difficult people in their families, and difficult situations that arose like Jesus just disappearing for a while as a pre-teen in our Gospel. But despite the challenges, there was love.

This love is something we are challenged to do and think about as we celebrate this feast of the Holy Family.

For starters, we have to recognize that all of us are flawed. We do things we are not proud of, and family members will inevitably hurt us and let us down. There are abusive situations where there needs to be separation, but more often than not there's moments where we do bad things or make poor choices. As a child, a parent may say "apologize to your brother" which we do begrudgingly, but more often things are much more complicated. The challenge is dealing with these rough edges in our families in a healthy way.

For one it means acknowledging that they are there. We should be loved. No one should experience what Janette did from an emotionally abusive stepparent. Sometimes we have to stand up for ourselves and say "that isn't right" or talk about the problems that are in our families for there to be true growth. And as I said, certainly in an abusive situation there may need to be separation.

But what of the difficult people? How about them? What strikes me with Janette's story is she could have just left her mom in the assisted living home, told them to take care of things and been more removed. But she made the choice to love and to be with her mom; to help her out; to be with her at the hospital and as she went through surgery. She realized her mom had her own emotional scars that impacted some of the choices she made later in life. Whether it's a parent, a brother or sister, or whoever, we need to think honestly about the people in our lives and how we relate to them. You can't force someone to love you. But bitterness can creep into a family where we hold a grudge for the past; where we won't be open to forgiveness. Or someone's personality maybe just bugs us so we keep them at arms length only to maybe cross paths at a wedding or funeral. But here's what we have to remember: we don't always choose the people we love as a family, but we are given people who we are called to love. And this is what makes a family holy; the fact that God knows we have this ability to love the people we call family. So as we are often around more family this time of year, maybe we can think about the people who are hard to love and do more than think sending a Christmas card fulfills our obligation to them. We can pray for them. We can consider calling them up and going out to lunch or dinner. We can try to look past just the rough edges and see their good qualities. And we can remember that when we show them actions of love, just as Janette's did for her mom, we can do so much to bring them God's love.

Through this all, we also acknowledge our own humanity too. It's OK to be angry or frustrated. It's OK to acknowledge when we have been hurt. Forgiveness is not just some magic wand; as I often remind people the resurrected Christ still has the wounds on his body. For true family healing, there needs to be communication and dialogue about what has happened. And a family member should not feel guilty for not being perfect, or think they have to do it all. There needs to be balance; I would tell parents at baptism classes don't feel guilty for having a date night or alone time together. Sometimes a parent thinks their life has to revolve around their child; and sometimes as we get older a person may think I have to do everything for my aging parent and often you have people in the "sandwich generation" trying to do everything for everybody so they are taxed and exhausted. But what we can do is take those small steps and realize that with talking things through, and doing simple actions of love, and seeing the good in

even the challenging people in our families, so many good things can happen through God's love at work in our families.

A few days before Christmas each year at a daily Mass there is the genealogy story of Jesus, where you have all these names going back through the Old Testament. We might wonder OK why is this all there, and the answer is because it shows what our God decided to do: to be born into this family. The list includes people of incredible virtue like Joseph, but people who also did bad things and lost their faith and made poor choices with their lives. Such is family - the human family that God is a part of. So on this Holy Family Sunday, maybe we can say a prayer for the living and faithful departed in our family who were a little bit more challenging. And maybe we can challenge ourselves to learn how to love even the people who aren't all that lovable in our families, because this is what our God chose to do by becoming part of our family in Jesus.