

As Catholics, prayer is certainly a big part of what we do; certainly at Mass, and most of us pray in our private lives too. Understandably, a lot of our prayer can be for our own needs or the needs of loved ones; much of it is petitionary prayer like we have following the Nicene Creed. But as we pray, perhaps the hardest part are the words “thy will be done,” words we often say in the Lord’s Prayer, but when the answer isn’t what our will is, words that can be easy to say, but hard to accept.

For years, Kerrie Flanagan had been a woman of prayer, and discerned that she was called to be a foster mother. But when things didn’t seem to be working out, she wasn’t sure what would happen.

She recalls saying to the social worker, “I can’t do this anymore. I’d like you to find another placement for the girls by the end of the month. I’m sorry.”

As she hung up the phone, she questioned if she had done the right thing. How would another move affect them? Would they feel abandoned? Would the next home be a safe place?

It had been one year since Kerrie and her husband and their two children, ages 8 and 10, decided to become a foster family.

During the training, they had high hopes that they would have a positive impact on the lives of the abused hurt children who could come through their home. They figured her background in education would be an asset. They heard the social workers talk about the challenges they might face, but all those thoughts were overshadowed by their excitement. Then the call came.

“Kerrie, we are looking for a home for two sisters, five-year old Paula and two-year-old Katie,” said the social worker. “The older girl has some developmental problems as the result of a brain injury from abuse.”

The social worker went on to explain that the girls had a newborn sister and older brother who had already been placed in two different homes. Social services would speed up their final paperwork if they agreed to take the girls, and they did.

When they arrived, their big brown eyes were filled with anxiety and uncertainty. Kerrie’s children showed their guests their new room where they’d put a stuffed animal, toothbrush, and book on each bed.

The first few days went well, but it wasn't long before their calm household was turned upside down. Because of their bad experiences around men, the girls cowered around Kerrie's husband. Katie began hitting, biting, crying at bedtime, and screaming in the car. Paula's special needs were more severe than they originally thought. She functioned more at a three-year old level and had problems with her balance and coordination.

Glimpses of hope broke through after a few weeks when Kerrie signed Paula up for a special education kindergarten class. They both girls eye exams and glasses. Katie's outbursts virtually disappeared.

They watched as Katie began talking more, counting to ten and showing more independence. Paula learned to ride a bike, tie her shoes and zip her coat.

Kerrie enjoyed the good moments but questioned their good intentions as they watched their own children struggle with this new challenge. The girls followed her daughter around, pestering her with questions and not allowing her a moment of peace. Her son, a quiet, mellow boy by nature,

had a hard time with the constant chatter and listening to the girls fight. Paula antagonized him until he couldn't take being around her and hid away in his room.

Kerrie's kids tried to be good sports, but they were tired of being dragged around in the car for the girls weekly visits with their mom or mental therapists.

Kerrie knew Paula and Katie needed love, structure, and understanding, but her stress level was in overdrive. Their need for constant supervision made it difficult for her to cook dinner, clean or care for her family. Her relationship with her husband started feeling strained. She felt her life falling apart around her.

Her heart broke when her son came to her one day in tears, saying he wanted the girls to go and not to do foster care anymore.

Kerrie was torn. She wanted things to go back to the way they were, but the intense internal conflict paralyzed her and she couldn't think straight.

Good moms don't give up on their kids. Good moms do not abandon their children. Good moms hang in there.

So she prayed "God, please help me. Show me what I am supposed to do."

And the response that kept coming into her head was "It is time to let go."

She did not understand what she was to let go of; the fear, the exhaustion, the anxiety?

She finally confided in a friend and told her she felt like a horrible foster mom; her friend assured her it wasn't her fault the girls were in foster care. She didn't put them there and that it was OK to let go and tell the social worker she couldn't do this anymore.

Her words echoed in her head for days. She struggled with what to do. Was she to continue to subject her kids to the chaos, and put her own kids at risk to help the other two? The idea of having to choose devastated her and she wanted to run away. But she knew something had to be done, and this was the will of God.

Exhausted, she called Paula and Katie's caseworker, and social services moved quick and within a week the girls were in another city. They brought them to their new home and put on happy faces for their sake and gave them scrapbooks of their time with them, told them they enjoyed having them stay with her family and within minutes they were gone.

Time went on and life settled down. Everyone's stress level dropped and the house was quieter and they got back to their family routine, but for Kerrie, there was a piece of guilt.

Due to privacy laws regarding kids in foster care, there was no contact. People would ask where's Katie and Paula and she'd have to explain they could not do it anymore and the guilt clung together.

She thought of them often and though she did not miss the chaos, she missed the giggle of Katie and singing of Paula, and she wondered were they back with their mom or in foster care. She asked God to let her know if they were safe and happy, and to let her know if she did the right thing.

Four years went by and she was at the local 4H in the county fair with a friend and her family. They were visiting the area that housed the chickens and she saw a little girl clean out the cages. When she turned, in an instant she knew it was Paula; she looked and Katie was with her. Her heart raced; she grabbed her friend's arm and said look, there's Paula and Katie.

"You should go say hello," she said.

Kerrie said they would not remember her and it had been too long. She did see Mary the foster mom near them who used to take care of their baby sister. Her friend got her to say hello to Mary, who said she thought she looked familiar. When she asked how the girls were, Mary said they were in two more foster homes before they ended up with her; the courts terminated the biological mom's rights and all four kids were put up for adoption. Mary and her husband had the youngest siblings already so asked to adopt all four kids so they could grow up together. The girls got new names along with their new family, and loved being on their big property with the animals. Mary home-schooled the kids so they could get all the attention they needed.

Mary said they were doing really well; Kerrie holding back tears said that's what she needed to hear and thanked her friend.

She never did talk to Paula and Katie but she didn't need to; she got the answer she had been praying for; she knew they were safe and happy. Her guilt was lifted. What she had thought was the right thing to do and wanted to do at first wasn't quite what God had in mind, but God wanted her to be a nurturing bridge and a safe home for the girls as God prepared them for their forever family, and in the end, all worked out.

God does indeed answer prayers. As we hear from the Psalmist this week, "On the day I called, you answered me, O Lord." However it's important to note while God always answers prayers sometimes the answer isn't what we expect.

In the Gospel, God does answer the request of the disciples: they ask Jesus to teach them to pray, and he answers them, giving them the beautiful Lord's Prayer. And in the first reading, Abraham gets several answers to his response in negotiating for the salvation of Sodom and Gomorrah.

But what when the answer God gives us isn't quite what we want, or if it is no? Kerrie felt called to adopt, and at first it seemed that the two girls might be the answer to a prayer; but God had other plans that involved Kerrie and Paula and Katie, but weren't quite what she expected. Other times, God may seem to say "no" to something we are requesting. So what gives? How do we come to terms with "thy will be done?" and try to understand what to think when it seems our prayers aren't quite being answered?

As a starter, we have to remember God knows what He is doing. In our first reading, the Lord says He will go down and investigate the cry that has come up to him, and in the previous verses God says to Abraham he will reveal his plans to him, both for the destruction of the city which is part of his justice, and that also He will bestow undeserved blessings on Abraham and his family. God wants to instruct Abraham in the ways of righteousness and justice. Sometimes we want things a certain way or think we can see clearly what will make us happy or someone else happy, when in reality we can't see as far down the road as God can. We pray for this relationship to work out and God has something else or someone else in store for us; we pray to get the job but don't see an even better job is about to soon open

up; we pray for something difficult to go away, but maybe look back and see that experience taught us life lessons and made us stronger.

Secondly, God listens to us and journeys with us, but it's important for us to persist like Abraham so we know God better and more deeply. Note Abraham hems and haws a bit and so what emerges is what seems like a man negotiating with a used car salesman, Abraham asking the city to be saved if there are just 50, 40, 30, 20 and 10 righteous people. In reality, Abraham is most concerned about his nephew Lot who lives in Sodom; Lot and his family do escape though, reminding us how merciful God is. And in Jesus Christ, we have God's response of love and mercy; He takes upon our sins; He journeys with us; and He shows us love and forgiveness. The Father did not take the cup away from Jesus in the garden, but he sent angels to comfort Him, and even though the Son did not fully understand the Father's will, in the end He saved the world and was raised up. We should not take silence or perceived silence as a sign of God's indifference; rather we can look to the Eucharist, the Cross, and be reminded God is with us step by step and loves us more than we can ever imagine. By persisting in prayer we come to know and trust in God more deeply, in particular becoming aware of God's love and mercy for us.

Third, sometimes when we pray, sin can get in the way. To quote the Shel Silverstein poem "Prayer of the Selfish Child" "Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep and if I die before I wake I pray the Lord by toys to break so none of the other kids can use 'em." Sometimes a person prays for something, but they need to do a bit of work for the grace to get through. A person may pray that a neighbor moves or their boss or coworker is transferred or their kid doesn't get a certain teacher, but be so full of anger; a person may pray for a relationship to work out but have their own addictions or demons they first need to address; or pray for better relationships with a family member, but be caught up in a lack of forgiveness or bitterness in their soul. Sometimes we have to do a little bit of work, maybe getting introspective and clearing the ground so to speak for God's grace to land in our soul.

Fourth, sometimes God says "not yet." I know I'm not a good waiter and am extremely impatient. But think of growing up. I'd ride my bike around the block but had to wait a bit to ride further. My parents setting some boundaries for me wasn't them being mean; rather I just had to prepare a bit and get older so I'd know the trails and where were the safer places to

go. Sometimes we want something so bad, but we just aren't ready for it yet and need to grow or mature in our faith for the time to be right.

Fifth, remember God respects free will. We all have people we pray for but sometimes these people are making bad life choices. While part of us may wish God could just "fix" the person, God wants that person to freely choose the right path. God never forces anything; even at the Last Supper Jesus reaches out to Judas to dip his bread in the cup with him, but Judas' heart is closed. I know when I'm praying for someone to make some changes, I don't pray for God to "fix" them, but that they would come to know God's love and how to respond to it, and the Holy Spirit might grant them more wisdom to see the consequences of their actions or decisions.

Lastly, sometimes God wants us to work with Him. Abraham is persistent; he does not give up. And neither can we. It's why it's so important to persist in prayer; so we come to know God's love and will. But also why we persist in our actions. Let us not forget our actions make such a difference; Kerrie's short time with Paula and Katie helped them get the stability and peace they ultimately needed. On our part, we pray for help or for others, but when we take the initiative too and seek help for ourselves when we

are going through something tough, when we own up to our mistakes, when we do not give up on people and persist and telling them I might not agree with your choices but I love you and am here for you, and when we do not give up on evangelizing and trying to change this world for the better, we join with God and make a difference.

God is always seeking us out, and wants such great things for us and has such great plans for us. May we trust in God, knowing that we might not understand His will, but when His will is done, the end result will always lead us to happiness and peace.