

Are You Good Enough Yet?

A BOOK FOR
PERFECTIONISTS

and all who try too hard
or worry too much

Fr. Joe Kempf



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INTRODUCTION

You try so hard, don't you? Isn't it exhausting sometimes? Wouldn't it be great to live without that anxious pit in your stomach—to have a sense of peace and safety instead of feeling like there is always more you must do, more people to please, more arenas where you must prove yourself?

If you sometimes feel this way, the seeds of that struggle may have been planted in your childhood or adolescence. It could be, for example, that you heard words growing up that led you to feel you weren't good enough, that it wasn't safe for you to just be yourself. Or maybe there were messages you *didn't* hear that would have helped you better believe in yourself. Whatever the cause, I'm so sorry for whatever you suffered that kept you from knowing deep down that you are already enough, just as you are; that it is not your responsibility to fix everything; that you have nothing to prove, nothing to earn.

The good news is that even now you can come to a place of deeper peace and greater freedom. It is my heartfelt hope that the short chapters in this book will help that happen for you. Each chapter has a message of its own, and you might find it helpful to pause after each chapter to reflect on what it has for you.

A disclaimer: I am not a scholar, a systematic theologian, or a licensed counselor. I have just enough education to know that I don't know much. Actually, I'm rather proud of my new

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self-description born of the pandemic: *I am a carrier of intelligence, but, I am often asymptomatic.* Mostly, I am a pastor who loves his people, a generalist who has studied a bit of all of this along the way.

More importantly, I struggle too. That's probably my strongest credential. As you will read, I come by my struggles honestly. I am excited to share with you some of the insights, stories, encouragements, and perspectives that have helped me come to a place of greater peace, freedom, and joy—a place of “enoughness.”

You are worthy of that peace. You deserve to know that you are safe, you are loved, your life matters, and you are good enough just as you are. Because these things are true.

The Lesson of the Broken Crayon

*There is no perfection,
only beautiful versions of brokenness.*

SHANNON L. ALDER

Once I was visiting a buddy of mine while his daughter sat at the table coloring. She announced that she wanted to color something for me. As she earnestly set about her task, she pushed a bit too hard on one of her crayons and it broke. I wondered how she would respond. She paused for a second, then looked up to assure me: “It’s OK. Broken things are good, too.” With that, she took the broken part of the crayon still in her hand and continued to happily create a picture for me.

She was right. Broken things are good, too.

We are *all* broken on some level. We are all weak, all wounded. And unfortunately, most of us have not fully absorbed this deep-down truth: *It is OK to not be OK. It is OK to be broken.* Broken things *are* good.

Though it might be frightening at first to admit to ourselves that we are wounded and broken on some levels, it is ultimately freeing to do so. Our wounds can come from many sources:

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from parents who pushed us too hard to fractured relationships to losses of all kinds.*

Later, I'll look in particular at the core wounds of childhood and how our coping mechanisms (which we needed for our own emotional survival) later get in the way. Perfectionism (and its sidekick, being a people-pleaser) are just such unconscious survival mechanisms. Though they helped us cope as kids, they now invariably distance us from greater joy and freedom. Yet, they are so ingrained in us that we often don't know how else to be.

And if you struggle with perfectionism, try too hard, or worry too much? It's OK. In no way does this diminish you or your goodness. For God, you are no less important and no less lovable. Each of us, whatever our struggles, no matter how badly we've messed up or how badly we've been treated, is worthy of love. Each of us matters greatly to this world.

One of my many heroes is the Jesuit priest Fr. Gregory Boyle. The work he does with gang members in the streets of Los Angeles is inspiring. He helps those gang members—most of whom were neglected, mistreated, or abandoned by parents—to find healing in a safe place. He helps them to know their dignity and to find hope as the beloved children of God that they are.

*Other possible sources of pain include such things as bodily wounds and physical challenges; job losses; parents who weren't there when we needed them or who were incapable of giving us what we most deeply needed; sexual or verbal abuse; eating disorders; fears that others would not accept our sexuality (maybe we're not sure we accept it ourselves); a failed marriage—and the hopes that died along with it; estranged relationships with children; business ventures that fell apart; past mistreatments; or perhaps patterns of addiction, sin, or shame.

Once I heard Fr. Boyle tell a story from his book *The Whole Language*. He described a visit to Pelican Bay State Prison, which houses inmates deemed hardened and the most violent. The prison organized a performance by the wonderfully talented pianist Eric Genuis, who brought along a small string section. His plan was to play for forty-five minutes, then allow time for questions.

Eric began to play, and the music touched everyone gathered. They were all deeply moved, held in silence. Soon, the prisoners were all sobbing and the guards were discreetly wiping away their own tears. When he finished, Eric turned and asked if there were any questions. There was only silence. Eventually, one gang member, his face fully covered with tattoos, rose. He had something to say but was still crying, so it was difficult for him. He could finally utter his one-word question: “Why?” When Eric heard the question, he realized what the inmate was asking and began to cry as well. “Because you are deserving,” Eric replied. “You are worthy of beauty and music. And because there is no difference between you and me.”

Whatever your struggles, God knows that *you* are worthy. Yes, we are each broken, and always will be. Yet, no matter our mistakes or where life has taken us in the past, underneath what people see on the outside—below all that we feel and think—is no less than a child of God: intact and good; wanted and loved; unique and important; seen and safe; and deeply united with the God who created us and whose love will never end.

Or, as that wise young girl with the broken crayon put it, “Broken things are good, too.”

What Do You Think God Is Like?

*Once you know the God of love,
fire all the other gods.*

MIRABAI STARR

Shortly after I was ordained a priest, a woman told me that she greatly loved each of her children, of course, but, that she had an extra tenderness for the youngest who was born with no hand on his left arm. She described to me what it was like when the day that she feared finally happened. Her little boy came home from kindergarten that afternoon trying unsuccessfully not to cry. He explained that one of his classmates asked him what happened to his arm. He told everyone listening that he was born that way. Most of the kids seemed fine with that answer, but one of his classmates said, "That's weird," and several others laughed. The little boy didn't know a person could ever feel that lonely.

Mom comforted him a while, then looked him right in the eyes and said slowly and carefully, "Please, Michael, you've got to know this. That boy just doesn't yet know what I know and what God knows; that you are one of the most amazing people

God ever made. I love you just as you are—so much so that I couldn't possibly love you any more than I already do. So does God. Michael, God thinks you are wonderful, just as you are. God always will." The little boy buried his face in mom's arms and cried.

In his mom's love in that moment, the young boy experienced no less than the love of God. For God shows up for us most often in the goodness of the ordinary people of our regular lives. The love in that mom's heart for her little boy is exactly the kind of love God has for each of us.

A vital question for us to reflect on: What do we think God is like? More than one spiritual leader has said that—more important than believing that there is a God—is what we believe God is *like*. That's how crucial that question is.

So, what *do* you think God is like? Sadly, we sometimes stop wrestling with that question early in life. Maybe we settle on something we heard growing up. You know, Dad or Mom said something about God when we were a kid, or a teacher or priest gave us some image of God, and we assume all our lives that this is what God must be like. We filter all our life's experience through this often distorted and usually extremely limited way of thinking.

In truth, everything we could possibly say to describe God's goodness ultimately falls tremendously short of the reality of the wonders of God. Father Michael Himes, a theologian at Boston College, put it this way, "The least wrong thing we can say about God is that God is love."

If I had to pick only one word to describe God (and happily I don't) the word I'd choose would be "goodness." The goodness in that mom's heart for her child is the same goodness in

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God's heart. It's the same goodness I've been blessed to see in people at every age of my life's journey. When I'm at my best, I am blessed to experience this goodness in my own heart too.

Most likely, if you struggle with perfectionism, you are pretty good at beating yourself up. You don't need anyone else to tell you you're not good enough, that you don't measure up, that no one, no God, would deem you worthy of being truly loved just as you are. You do that to yourself.

How deeply God must wish you knew differently. God is *delighted* to claim you as God's child. God wants you to know you are loved and treasured as you are and more than you could ever know.

When that sad little kindergartner heard his mom say "I love you just as you are—so much so that I couldn't possibly love you any more than I already do," in his loneliness he heard the very voice of God. For that was God's love in his mom's heart for the little boy. It's the love at the heart of the universe. It is the love in God's heart for you this moment—and in every moment of every day.