

"You may think your own family is far from perfect, and perhaps have never considered them 'holy.' If so, then this book is for you."

From the foreword by **Fr. Dave Dwyer, C.S.P.**
Executive director of Busted Halo Ministries

LIVE BIG, LOVE BIGGER

★
GETTING
REAL WITH
BBQ,
SWEET TEA,
AND
A WHOLE
LOTTA
JESUS

**KATHRYN
WHITAKER**

Introduction

SUCKER PUNCHED BY GOD

I have a bad habit of opening my mouth when I should probably zip it. Maybe you do too?

Part of it is passion, at least that's what I tell myself. "No big or go home" has been my motto for as long as I can remember.

For years, ALL CAPS Kathryn always had something to say. I believed the things I shared were just extensions of the life I painstakingly crafted to keep the world from seeing who I really am, what all my fears really are, and how I really love.

An intense worry of being "found out" by my closest friends drove me to build a perfect life, brick by

brick, complete with a picket fence, a spotless minivan, Pottery Barn decor, and kids clothed in Janie and Jack. I guarded who I really was pretty tightly. I was convinced that if any balls dropped, it would be my fault. Plus, not having the answers was an out-of-body experience I wasn't prepared to handle.

Have you ever felt that fear? (Please say yes.) The fear that if you show God—and the rest of the world—who you really are, you'll be standing on an island all by yourself? I had a pretty good gig going as the mom of four, with one on the way.

But God has a wicked sense of humor.

In 2009, we welcomed our fifth child, a premature baby, Luke. He was a dainty three pounds and change, and at nine days old, he was fighting for his life. Luke's chances of surviving were a stark two in ten.

In one fell swoop, that perfect house I handcrafted didn't just crumble; it crashed to the ground—glass shattered, walls caved in, pipes burst, and beams broke.

Granted, it wasn't the first time my faith life endured a sucker punch. But with each of the previous challenges I had been able to weather the storm, rally all my inner forces, and manage to get the perfect house back in order. There had never been anything a little spackle, paint, and strategically placed art couldn't hide.

But that was not the case this time. No amount of redecoration could hide or heal that massive hit to the heart and soul.

I was forced to look deep into the crevices of my life and realize just how much control I did not have. I was reminded of just how messy life can be—how messy life really is. But through the circumstances of Luke's

birth and the effect it had on my other children and my marriage, I also found beauty and a deeper connection with a God who loves the *real* me and takes every trial and error and uses them for good.

That love awakened a desire to cultivate a life framed by intention. Instead of worrying about how clean the van was (who am I kidding, I still care about that), how put together the house looked, or where we vacationed, I started to take stock of the real person residing within my soul. What's the condition of *my* house? Is it centered on a desire to ask God to frame it with purpose? Or am I still trying to be the chief superintendent and project manager?

The truth is I was a control freak who cared way too much about how things looked and not enough about how they really were. I could not detach myself from managing my own life. Truthfully, I didn't really want to.

"Hope deprives us of everything that is not God, in order that all things may serve their true purpose as means to bring us to God," says Thomas Merton, a Trappist monk and author of *No Man Is an Island*. "Hope is proportionate to detachment."

Hope is proportionate to detachment.

Luke—the child that I clung to the tightest, the baby I begged God to spare—was God's invitation to detachment. When I was with him at his hospital bedside, all my worldly cares faded away. But as soon as I stepped foot out of the hospital, the cares came crashing in around me.

You and I have a lot of cares in our lives. I care about how tight my jeans are, how my hair looks, and what other people wear. I care what people think about

me. I care how many followers I have on social media (did someone just unfriend me?!) and where other people are vacationing. I care if shoes are left in the hallway, if dishes are put away, or if my kids are making their beds.

Some of the cares we have are valid, but most are not.

There is something so tender and vulnerable about living a broken life. When your soul is exposed and all you want to do is climb out of the nightmare, you do not have time to pretend. You can't manage other people's emotions or worry about relationships. You have no bandwidth left.

In those dark, wee hours of the morning at Luke's neonatal intensive care unit (NICU) bedside, listening to the incessant beeping on the monitor and feeling the steady breath of my son whisper across my cheek, I found a God who was begging me to wake the hell up and be intentional. I mean, right after I threw a fit and told him he was completely and totally bananas. This God had been waiting for me to be purposeful and open to the life he had planned for me. And it looked absolutely nothing like that Pottery Barn-furnished house.

God knows how to find us in the darkness. As the rocking chair tick-tocked back and forth, with my son in my arms and the heart monitor slowly beeping his heart rhythm, we found our radio frequency. Trust me: I begged God to lighten the load. I cried so many tears fighting his plan, telling him I wasn't strong enough to be this child's advocate, heal my struggling marriage, and be a kind and generous friend or the mom my kids needed. I tried convincing him that he was wrong. He wasn't buying what I was selling.

So here I sit, a decade later, with a new, more intentional life. The darkness gave way to light. The fear led to detachment. The vulnerability paved a pathway to purpose, and we finally found our freedom—a freedom to love, to change, to seek adventure, to let things go, and to live a life truly centered on Christ.

As much as I wish I could outline a whole, fancy ten-item checklist for how to live a more purpose-filled life, it's impossible. Life isn't one long, laminated to-do list (even though my grocery list certainly is). Intention doesn't come in check boxes. The lessons our family learned transformed us in every way. For one, we got to enjoy copious amounts of excellent BBQ. But we also learned how to look at every area of our life, hand it to God, and say, "Redeem it." When I invite you to take a leap of faith in transforming your own life, bit by bit, know that I understand just how scary it can be. But do it anyway, y'all.

When we learn that a friend is diagnosed with a debilitating illness or suffering an intolerable season of life, we recognize the difficulty of the journey. We see her suffering, and we often provide her with the space she needs. We find a way to forgive her inability to be all things to all people. We often excuse her from having to do all the things and be at all the places. But when *we're* the ones suffering, the ones struggling, the ones trying to catch our breath, we try to power through it all on our own. Surely *we* don't need the same space, the same kind heart, or the same understanding tribe of friends. Or do we?

Ultimately, you have to face the mirror and get honest about what God desires for your family, or you

might as well hand the keys of your soul over to your calendar.

The question I couldn't avoid after Luke's birth was, *Is it worth it?* Your family culture, the relationships with the people you love most, your time, your body, your family vacations, your friendships, and your peace—are they worth it? At 2:00 a.m. when you're finishing up the volunteer project you said would be no problem, is it worth it? The thousands of dollars you spend on extracurriculars, the debt you accumulate buying a life you can't afford, is that worth it? Are you happy you said yes, or are you begging God for a reason to say no? Maybe it's time to start dividing things into two categories: a no or a *hell yes*.

Our family isn't perfect—we have a seat at my dinner table and don't mind the spilled milk. But we are better. It has been a messy path to get this far, and I suspect it will always be that way. But I've learned this: when you let the littlest thing transform you, when you let God into all the places—and I mean *all the places*—you will be healed in ways you didn't even know you needed to be healed.

God's grace and mercy will simultaneously blind-side you and fill you with gratitude. Because instead of chasing the life you think you deserve, you'll be basking in the freedom of intentional living. You'll stop trying to overdo life, and you'll start living it with a genuine heart—with love, with passion, and with purpose. That's what happens when you understand that being an imperfect disciple making imperfect choices with an imperfect heart for an all-loving and perfect God is living a *hell yes* kind of life.