

Loving the struggle

By [Jeff Nelson](#)

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The first time I engaged in the spiritual practice of walking a labyrinth was when I was beginning seminary. My class traveled to a Catholic retreat center that had a labyrinth on its grounds. It was an 11-circuit, [Chartres-style](#) one with larger stones around the path and gravel on which to walk. After a brief explanation by one of our retreat leaders, we were released to give it a try.

I've walked a labyrinth many times since, with mixed results. In the times when I'm too conscious of what I'm doing, when I'm willing something to happen, I get nothing out of it. I'm just walking a bunch of twists and turns, and I'll have burned a few calories for my trouble. On the other hand, when I give myself over to the practice, when I free my mind and spirit and just let the path open before me, that is when I receive something from it.

This realization was clearest for me on one of the times I walked the labyrinth during my sabbatical in 2010. That day, before entering, I posed a question related to ministry at that time on which I was hoping for some direction. After a few moments, I began my walk.

That particular walk started as one where I wanted to force an answer out of the practice. At first I made each turn deliberately, wanting each step to bring me closer to what I wanted. I started to notice this about myself, and began reflecting on how sometimes I seem to like the idea of the labyrinth more than the practice of it. I'll turn to it for a way of seeking God's direction, but then try to bend it to my control, my parameters, my desires. And then I leave disappointed.

After a few moments of thinking about this, an internal voice said, "Maybe you love the idea of ministry a little too much, too."

By that point, I had been a pastor for just over five years. Before beginning at my first church, I did love the idea of ministry. I had grand dreams of what I would be able to do, the creative muscles I could assert, the traditions that I could help bring to life among my people in new ways, the opportunities for mission and service that

surely would be all around us, ready for us to accept.

Of course, ministry in practice is a whole different experience. It involves real people with hangups and idiosyncrasies and schedule conflicts and priorities and ideas about the church that differ from yours. It involves a much slower process of adaptations and change than what you might be prepared for. It involves more limited resources and convincing the right people of new concepts and weird systemic stuff that takes years to understand, let alone work with.

A lot of people love the idea of ministry, less so the particulars. That's why so many pastors leave ministry within the first five years. It wasn't what they expected. The idea and the practice are too far apart to be reconciled. I've wondered about that for myself at times. Is what I'm doing worth any of our while, let alone God's? Is any of this remotely close to what Jesus had in mind?

There's an episode of the show *Parks and Recreation* where the main character, Leslie, is complaining to her colleague Ron about how hard public service is. She's considering leaving everything behind after years of stonewalling and lack of appreciation from her fellow citizens. Ron replies with a story about fixing a radiator, saying he did it because he enjoys fixing them. He applies it to Leslie's situation thus: "You like fixing this town, Leslie. You always have. You know it's an uphill battle, but you love the struggle."

To serve in ministry, you have to love the struggle. You have to love the struggle of bringing individuals into a new understanding of what the church can be. You have to love the struggle of helping families deal with the emptiness of loss. You have to love the struggle of wrestling with biblical texts and how they may apply to the complicated, anxious lives of those hearing you read them each week. You have to love the struggle of reconciling the needs of a community with what your people are willing and able to do, as well as gently challenging them to do more. You have to love the struggle of loving the people to whom you are called before they'll allow you to lead them. Not every pastoral visit will end in a tidy bow and not every program will manifest the kingdom of God right before your eyes, and that's OK. The struggle, like all of life, continues. And those moments of grace that happen along the way, big or small, make it worthwhile.

Earlier this year I marked the tenth anniversary of my ordination. Ten years ago, I made vows to, among other things, speak the truth in love while maintaining the

peace of the church. The tension between these two has always brought a struggle. At times I have been called to one more than the other, and I have had to discern when each has been necessary. I have a far-from-perfect track record, but the struggle is more about being present than being perfect.

In ten years, I like to think that I've been disabused of my love of the idea of ministry. What I have to love instead is the struggle, the God who has called me and the people with whom I live out that calling. The idea was never real, anyway. Living and ministering in reality has brought many more blessings.

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