

Struggling for things has gone out of favor. If you google "making life easier" you'll get over 450 *million* hits. We love our lives of relative ease. And we would love to make them easier.

Have you noticed it? No one wants to struggle anymore. We don't want to struggle at work, we don't want to struggle with tough concepts, we don't even want to struggle with masks! We've come a long way from my parent's era when they routinely told me that "Struggling is good for the soul."

So I listened with interest to a story on NPR: In 1979, a man named Jim Stigler went to Japan to observe classroom teaching methods as part of his graduate studies. He found himself sitting at the back of a fourth grade math class. The students were all learning to draw a 3 dimensional cube.

Well, one student just didn't understand how to do it. He tried and tried, scratching out attempts in his notebook. The teacher, seeing him struggle, asked him to come to the front of the class to work it out on the board. He continued to struggle. The teacher went back to teaching the other students—who had all successfully drawn cubes. Every so often, she would turn around and ask, "Does he have it yet, class?" The class would look up from their work, look at the board, and say, "no," and they would go back to their work.

This exchange happened several times, and Mr. Stigler, the graduate student, was feeling more and more uncomfortable—thinking the student would soon burst into tears.

At the end of the class, the teacher looked up at the student, still at the board, and said, "Does he have it now, class?" They looked up and said, "Yes!" and they applauded for him. The student took his seat, beaming.

The Japanese school system believes it is essential to learn through struggle. They teach their students that struggle is good, it is necessary, in fact—to really learn the material.

When I was attempting to learn algebra—which believe me I struggled with—the teacher would stand up in front of the class, write down these complicated endless equations, and then say, "everyone got it?" If some poor hack raised his hand for more help, all my classmates would roll their eyes, and the teacher, with barely concealed contempt for the student's inability to understand SIMPLE equations, would grudgingly go over it again. Did I let ever confess that I was struggling? No way. And I never learned algebra either.

But in Japan they believe that everyone must struggle and work hard, that it is essential to real understanding. They applaud people who wrestle with concepts in their classrooms, and they deliberately work *struggle* into their curriculums.

Now, lest you think I'm dissing America, the Japanese acknowledge that they're not as creative as Americans. Creativity is harder for them, evidently. But I think they are correct that struggle is essential to us as human beings.

Perhaps, despite our popular culture telling us differently, we are wired to be creatures of struggle.

*A disciple said to Jesus: "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!" Then Jesus asked him, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down. When this happens, beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and they will lead many astray. When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs."*

Birth pangs. What humanity is giving birth to right now is nothing less than a breaking open of our hearts so that we can bring to birth the kingdom of God—to create a more just world for everybody who lives on this planet. To do what we need to be open enough to put aside the pretense that the world is a fair and just place already.

We need to be able to listen and struggle—there's that word again—struggle to understand another person's reality. Another person's experience of life. To be ready to really listen to those whose daily interaction with people is full of pain, lack of acceptance, and lack of opportunities. This will not be easy.

We will struggle with this just as much as a mother struggles to bring her baby into the world.

And while we are struggling with new knowledge, new understandings- that claim our attention, others will try and keep us from pondering new things. They might even try to lead us astray. Jesus warns us not to be fooled. Some will come who claim to be “anointed” by the truth, he says. They might even say that they are Christ's spokespeople— but be careful.

Don't be swayed by their big promises, their talk of safety & surety. Don't be fooled when these people say that the baby being born is dangerous—while telling you that you don't need to struggle, that these edifices we have built are all we need.

These people are more impressed with the façade. They care more about how the building looks. It does look impressive, doesn't it? But it's empty, and it will fall. The kingdom of God – Jesus says-- is not about the strength of the buildings—how they look from the outside, it's about what's inside the buildings that matters; it's the foundation that counts. Is it supported by love, justice, and mercy? If it isn't, the building will not stand.

Christ nature will be born in us only if we are willing to struggle to give it birth. Love of God and neighbor goes beyond society's and sometimes even beyond established religion's boundaries. Just ask Jesus.

He pushed against most of the human made boundaries of his time. When religious canon or political law came up against love—love marched up to the confines of his era every time.

And we also must break new ground for new life to spring up. And I don't know about you—but this loving God and loving neighbor can be a challenge. Make us struggle.

Like the Japanese math student, we need to keep at it and at it, making attempt after attempt at proficiency, until we break through to new awareness. New revelation. New humility. Only when the old structures have cracked open, can the new life of the kingdom be born. Amen.