

I was sitting in the congregation during a confirmation service while I was a student in Montreal. A group of kids at the front had memorized the Apostle's Creed and were reciting it line by line. I believe in God the father almighty, maker of heaven and earth – said one. I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only son who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified died and was buried – said another. He descended to the dead and on the third day rose again and ascended into heaven where he sits at the right hand of the father, from whence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead – said a third. And then silence. A fourth youth hadn't shown up. Thinking quickly, the first girl turned to the Minister and announced "The boy who believes in the Holy Spirit isn't here today."

Sometimes we're more honest by accident than we are by intent.

The satirical News Site Babylon Bee, recently ran the following article.

In order to promote a distraction-free, comfortable worship experience "without any of that Spirit funny business," an elder at Grace Presbyterian Church of Greenfield reportedly took a moment before Sunday morning service to politely ask congregants to "please silence or turn off all movements of the Holy Spirit, out of respect for your fellow church members." The elder went on to clarify that "if you must respond to an urgent or personal call of the Holy Spirit upon your life, please be courteous to those around you by taking the call out in the foyer, rather than rudely interrupting the service. Thank you for your cooperation."

To call the relationship between Presbyterians and the Holy Spirit strained is like calling Tim Horton's just some coffee shop.

We give it one line in our Creeds, a couple of paragraphs in our confessions, and then we go on living lives that for the most part are content to ignore it. And let me be first to get in line and confess that this is my story too. God the creator of all things is nothing for me if not other. God the redeemer is, for me, a historical reality of two millennia ago. So I get to hold God the Father at arm's length for philosophical reasons and we get to hold God the Son at arm's length for historical reasons. But God the Spirit refuses our arm's length and insists instead on frustrating our philosophical arrogance and theological certainty by breaking down our historical barriers and coming along side us, whispering right into our ear, Trust me.

So I get not feeling particularly comfortable with the Holy Spirit because if nothing else, it takes us out of the driver's seat of our own life, and that's scary.

And I've got good news: if that scares you, if that makes you feel out of your depth, if it makes you say – I don't want to do that: you're in good company. Jesus own followers, men and women who had seen Jesus call Lazarus out of the grave, freak out when Jesus tells them it's going to be their responsibility to carry on after he's gone. They're perplexed, obstinate, and scared. So if we're feeling any of those things in relation to the Holy Spirit, the good news is that we're in the company of the saints and apostles who took the mission of Jesus to every country on earth and began the single greatest force for good that the world has ever seen.

How? They made the choice to pursue discipleship. They realized that simply being fans of Jesus wasn't enough: they had to become followers – they had to pursue

discipleship. In his absence, they had to be able to do what he would do, to say what he would say, to go where he would go, and be what he would be. And to do that they had to plug into the same source that Jesus relied on.

According to research published in January 2006, when a female ant of the species *Temnothorax albipennis* goes out to find food, she will often choose another ant to accompany her. If the second ant doesn't know the way to the food source, the leader will teach her through a process called "tandem running." As the teacher runs along the path to food, the student follows behind, often stopping to locate landmarks. That creates a gap between the leader and student. When ready, the student will run forward and tap the teacher on the back legs.

Ants participating in tandem running located a food source in an average of 201 seconds, while ants searching for food on their own took an average of 310 seconds (a 35 percent difference). However, the process is detrimental to the teachers. Research indicated that the lead ants traveled up to four times faster when not accompanied by a student.

So why do leaders sacrifice their time and efficiency to teach others? According to Nigel Franks, study leader, "They are very closely related nest mates, and their society as a whole will benefit." This occurs as the students gradually learn their way and are able to teach other ants, which increases the efficiency of the entire population.

Jesus promises us a helper, a tandem runner – literally a paraklete, one called alongside – a dancing partner, to continue the process of becoming disciples.

And it is a process of becoming.

In his book, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church*, Princeton Missiologist Darrel Guder argues that the church's framework of discipleship needs to move from bounded to unbounded Discipleship.

Bounded thinking is the legacy of Christendom: do enough, say enough, be enough to cross an arbitrary line that makes you a Christian. Say a sinner's prayer, write a big cheque to the church at Christmas time, acknowledge Jesus as Lord and Saviour or check a box on a census form every couple of years, and you can say you are a disciple. Bounded thinking neatly divides the world into an us and a them, an in versus an out.

Being Christ followers in a secular age means casting off bounded thinking and instead constantly and consistently seeking to move closer to the centre which has itself not changed. It is a call into a lifelong process of becoming rather than being – and that makes all the difference.

Only when it is seen as a sense of becoming rather than being can the pursuit of discipleship become a lifelong pursuit. Because the areas God is calling you to grow in are constantly changing, and every season of life is going to put new challenges in front of you, the finish line has to keep moving .

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**Pursuing Discipleship**

Rev. Jared Miller

John 14:15-31

And that's why Jesus' message to the disciples is still so crucial for us today. He knows what a tall order discipleship is and he knows that on our own it would be impossible. So he makes sure we never have to be on our own. He promises to not leave us orphaned – fending for ourselves, and so he offers us a partner who prays for us, who assures us, who guides and convicts us, who enlightens us, who encourages, empowers and equips us for every good work.

And so we, two thousand years later, find ourselves carried by the same spirit, pursuing the same discipleship and feeling the same anxiety.

The reason that Jan and I wanted to spend the next few months intentionally looking at the topic of discipleship is because as a church, we're unsure what the future holds. We thought we would have welcomed a new Minister of Vision and Direction by now, but God still hasn't brought that person to us. And the waiting can be hard, exhausting and frustrating – especially when there doesn't seem to be an end in sight. But when you look back at the stories of God's people, that story doesn't sound very out of place. Abraham waits thirty years from the time God promises him a son until Isaac is born; Moses wanders forty years; 25 years pass between David's anointing as King and his assumption of the throne. Israel waits four hundred years between the last prophecy about the Messiah, and the birth of Jesus. Waiting puts us in good company because in every one of those instances, God uses the waiting to shape the hearts of his people.

Don't doubt in the dark what God has shown you in the light. Don't abandon the bold vision God has given you as a church, and don't shy away from becoming the disciples he has called you to be. Make this vacancy about your heart and nothing else. That is the pursuit of discipleship.

Amen.