

June 9, Pentecost C (John 14:8-17, 25-27)

## **Poor Philip just needs a little more from God. I know how he feels.**

by [Teri McDowell Ott](#) in the [May 22, 2019](#) issue

Recently I started seeing a spiritual director. I needed to feel something again. I love my work as the chaplain of a college—I love learning and am surrounded by students and teachers. But this context keeps me in my head a lot. I yearned for a conversation partner in faith, someone who believed but didn't negate her brain. Forty-five minutes north of me, the Sisters of St. Benedict live and run a retreat center. I had referred people to the sisters for spiritual direction, but I had never gone myself.

The monastery is easy to get to. I turn right off the highway into a neighborhood of midwestern ranch homes. Then I turn left onto a quiet street that opens up into an expansive view: the monastery, set on the edge of a hill and overlooking acres of beautiful hardwoods just beginning to turn many colors for fall. I roll down my windows to take it all in—the crisp air, the view, the sunlight highlighting it all. I feel a sense of peace just driving into this beautiful, unexpected nook; I haven't even stepped through the monastery doors.

Sister Margaret meets me at the front door, dressed in a sweater, a pretty scarf, and comfortable-looking pants. After we sit down in her office, she begins our session with *lectio divina* and a prayer. Then we get to know each other. Sister Margaret is 75 years old, but she still gets around easily. As we speak, she refers to scripture but also quotes Gandhi and a Zen master. I like her right away. She encourages me to practice centering prayer, which she describes as a practice in which you simply “let God look at you.”

John 14, the first chapter of Jesus' farewell discourse to his disciples, begins and ends with messages of comfort: “Do not let your hearts be troubled” and “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you.” Philip's not getting it, though. Or, in his despair over losing Jesus, he just needs more—more evidence, more comfort, more

flesh-and-blood Jesus instead of spiritual-experience Jesus. “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied,” he says.

Scholars refer to this moment as a Johannine “misunderstanding,” meant to take the reader deeper or explain a topic further. So poor Philip is rebuked by Jesus for his failure—a failure not to understand but to believe. “How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? Do you not yet believe?”

I want Jesus to lighten up on Philip. Poor guy just needs a little more from God, and I know how he feels.

Before I leave Sister Margaret’s office, she hands me a piece of paper with some verses on it. I put it in the pocket of my coat, thanking her for our meeting and her invitation to walk the monastery grounds and visit the chapel.

As I explore, I feel I should tiptoe so as not to disturb the quiet that hangs in the air—a stillness that is light and vibrant, not heavy and foreboding. I wander down to the library and peruse the sisters’ books. Then I walk toward the center of the monastery until I reach the thick double doors of the chapel. I open them shyly and peak inside, afraid some of the sisters might be praying. The chapel is empty, so I slip inside and the doors close gently behind me with a quiet huff.

The font, shaped like a huge ceramic pot, calls to me from its central location, its water running over the lip into a shallow pool beneath. The sound of the infinity water is magic, bouncing off the clean slate tile floor, mixing perfectly with the silence of the chapel like yeast in a loaf. I dip my fingers and move to a wooden chair with a velvet cushion. *Which sister sits here?* I wonder as I open my wet fingers, palm up on each of my knees. *Let God look at you.*

I try to open myself to the presence of the One whom I have had such a hard time experiencing lately. I close my eyes and imagine myself under God’s gaze. *What?* I’d say, if I caught my husband looking at me, or my mother with her little smile. *What?* I say to God now, trying to understand, trying to follow Sister Margaret’s advice. I sit, the infinity water falling as my discomfort rises. *What is God doing? Why won’t God say something?* All I feel is exposed and vulnerable.

Then I remember the piece of paper in my pocket. I pull it out and read. “You are precious in my eyes; I love you” (Isa. 43: 1-11). “I have called you by name” (Isa. 43: 1-7). “I have written your name on the palm of my hand” (Isa. 49:1-16). “With

an age-old love I have loved you” (Jer. 31:3). My heart stirs.

At the end of this passage from John, Jesus explains that the Holy Spirit will serve as both a teacher and a reminder. The Spirit will continue Jesus’ ministry of educating and guiding but also remind us that we are always under God’s gaze. If we believe, and if we can find it in ourselves to be vulnerable and still, we might catch God looking—and feel the comfort our Savior desires for us.