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Outgrowing Expectations
Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, OH

The tree had outgrown its bows. It was a bit of a surprise for me, as it had been one of my jobs to decorate the little Colorado Blue Spruce every year for Christmas. I had helped plant the little tree with my parents a few years before. At the time, it was barely knee high; and so green and perfectly shaped it was already adorable even before we decided to decorate it with bright red bows for Christmas. Because the tree was so small, we only needed one package of 24 premade red bows to cover the tree. I had gotten used to and enjoyed going out into the Wisconsin cold every early December to attach the bows to the tree. It looked so cute we'd usually take a family picture by the decorated tree. We did this for years, marking the year by the growth in us children, as the tree always seemed to stay the same, looking festive with 24 bright red bows tied to the ends of its Colorado Blue-green spruce branches.

Except for the year when I went outside with the package of bows in my hands and noticed the tree had changed. It was no longer knee high. It was a lot taller. And fuller, and rounder. Sometime when we weren't looking, the little tree had grown. And now 24 bows weren't only not going to be enough, they would be swallowed up by the tree and no one would see them. We needed more and larger bows if we wanted the same look. Which we tried for a year or two before the little tree was too big for bows of any size. For a while, my parents put Christmas lights on the tree, until it grew too tall and wide even for lights.

The tree is still alive today; big, and healthy with raspberries growing beneath it and there is always at least one bird's nest somewhere within its lush branches. To look at the tree today it is difficult to imagine it was once so small it barely came up to a thirteen-year old's knees. Good thing we have the pictures to prove it.

According to the parables Jesus told in our Gospel reading today, what I experienced with the Colorado Blue Spruce is like how God's Kingdom is present here on earth. Scholars call the parables we heard in Mark's Gospel today the "Great Assurances" because they are intended to be Jesus' way of explaining to his followers how despite his ministry defied the expectations of the time, God's Kingdom was present on earth. It wasn't going to show up in big, bold, violent, oppressive ways like the Roman Empire. God's Kingdom wasn't going to be

militant, which is what many people of Jesus' day expected. But just because it didn't meet expectations, that didn't mean God's Kingdom wasn't present and wasn't growing in their midst. When Jesus mentioned the harvest in the first parable he told, scholars tell us he was quoting the Old Testament prophet Joel and was promising God is going to one day put the world to right. But, like Jesus' own ministry, that event won't look what it was expected to look like.

Through Jesus, God is present on the earth, among people, and God is up to something, it just isn't always something we can see, quantify, qualify, consume, or recognize through our usual way of seeing and experiencing the world. But just because we can't see it, track it, or graph it, that doesn't mean it isn't happening.

I have read critics that claim this interpretation is not very comforting, especially for people going through difficult times, those who are suffering injustices or poor health or emotional issues or financial strife. Those critics are probably right, especially if we stop examining the parables right here.

Which would be a shame because these are parables, and there is always more to a parable. We have to be oh so careful not to make parables smaller than they are by thinking we already know everything they are or mean. Like that Colorado Blue Spruce in my parents' front yard, there is so much more going on with parables, we just can't always see it.

One of my favorite interpretations of these parables is the caution to overlook the value in something small. A mustard seed is miniscule, but it won't stay small forever. We human beings can have the unattractive tendency to judge people and things harshly based on their outward appearance. The Colorado Blue Spruce Tree taught me the foolishness of this tendency. We can look at people or churches or ministries and write them off as unnecessary because of the small number of participants instead of looking closer at the level of engagement.

I've seen this happen over the past year with campus ministries across the country. As Convener of the Campus Ministry Collaborative in our diocese, I am in regular contact with the other campus ministries in our diocese and in other states including Indiana, Wisconsin, Illinois, Michigan, and Minnesota. Some of these ministries are traditional Canterbury Club style student focused ministries, some are like ours that are more inclusive of the entire campus community. During the pandemic, as campuses closed, campus ministries lost a large number of participants. This was painful as many did not have large numbers to begin with. But after a period of grieving, and making adjustments, all of us in campus

ministry noticed a phenomenal change. Instead of reaching out to students or faculty, the students and faculty reached out to the campus ministers. All of us found ourselves with fewer people but each person who contacted a campus minister was seeking a deeper level of engagement from conversations about everything from frustrations with on-line learning, to the relief and comfort they found figuring out on-line learning, to the questions they were asking about what is next in their lives. For most of us, it became an energizing experience because there was growth. Not numerical, statistical growth, but the kingdom of God kind of growth, a growing closer to God, to each other, and growing braver to explore what is God calling us all to instead of always doing the same old comforting programs. All of a sudden, we realized those programs were as impotent as the 24 bright red bows on a tree that had outgrown expectations, and this gave us joy.

Perhaps that is the assurance in these parables. The assurance that says God is at work, and maybe we need to adjust our expectations to recognize it. And because God is at work, things won't necessarily turn out like we want them to, but we will get through any difficulty and find ourselves in something good.

I've witnessed firsthand how an act of generosity – not charity, but a truly selfless gift of time, listening, or resources – can help a person feel valued and gives them hope they will endure through a difficult time. I've seen how expressions of empathy – not cliché statements – can make a person feel they will get through a difficult personal or medical situation. I've seen how just making a person feel seen for who they are – like using that person's preferred pronouns or smiling at someone as they walk down the street - can help make a person get a glimpse of God's Kingdom and the truth that God really does love all people, no exceptions, like it says on our church sign.

I wonder if Jesus was also saying through these parables that God's Kingdom isn't something we are responsible for creating on our own. That God is at work through God's presence. That is why we have to let go of our need to count, control, and form something whether it is a ministry or a liturgy or relationship to try to make it to conform to something so small we miss seeing how God is at work in it. I believe God longs to work with us, and sometimes we have to get ourselves out of the way and let God work. This doesn't mean, as critics suggest, that we step out completely and do nothing. That's not how collaboration works, nor is it what Jesus is suggesting in the parables. We still have roles to play, contributions to make, problems to engage, relationships to create, ideas to share, adjustments to make. It is just that as we go about our

ministries, our lives, our work, our education, we can step back and make room for God to enter into whatever we are involved in even if it is small. As Jesus reminds us, God loves the small, perhaps because no one and nothing is too small for God's love and growth in our lives, in our church, in our community, in the world.