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Small Annoyances Grow into Big Frustrations

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Don't underestimate small annoyances, because they can quickly grow into large frustrations. It didn't take long for me to remember this little truth when I was working at Bobcat Student Orientation this past week. This is something I look forward to every year: representing United Interfaith Association, which Church of the Good Shepherd is an active member of, at a table in the check-in room that is part of the resource fair OU offers its newest students. I think it's a lot of fun; its an opportunity to meet some of the new students, let them know about the religious and spiritual resources available to them, invite them to fill out an on-line form that lets them provide their contact information to local churches or religious groups, and bid them welcome. It is an opportunity to get to know other members of United Interfaith Association better as we are at the table together for several hours. And it's a chance to talk with OU employees working the tables around us: this year we are between recreation and career coaching. And it's a chance to see the orientation staff made up of college students excel in creating a good environment to be in. It's an experience I enjoy for these and lots of other reasons.

But it is not without challenges. This year it didn't take me long to remember one challenge that is particularly difficult for me to deal with: working with one of my Interfaith colleagues. Most of the time, no matter who my table partner is, we can find some common ground to talk about while we fill the time between students stopping by our table. I've learned a lot and gotten to know most Interfaith representatives well. But there is one colleague who I find frustrating to work with.

It isn't because of his different theology; even though he is from a more conservative evangelical branch of Christianity. I can tolerate his constantly talking over me or just not letting me talk. Even his aggressive pitch to students and small talk that is more focused on himself than the student he is talking to is something I can patiently handle. What makes this person a challenge for me to work with is when there are no students at our table, because that is when he constantly complaining.

Complaining about all the students who pass us by, all the different ways we are rejected: politely, outright ignored, or intentionally avoided. Even when other tables are passed over by new students, he still complains and says it is because we represent spirituality and religion that is the reason we are rejected most of the time. Perhaps his behavior was getting on my nerves because the days I worked with him were slow days for orientation, there just weren't very many students, even the folks

at the other tables said it seemed slow to them. So we had plenty of time for conversation, and he was filling it by complaining about something we really couldn't do anything about.

It got to the point where I was tired of the repetition, so I took advantage of a lull in the conversation to voice an observation: This year United Interfaith purchased a banner to attach to the front of our table that more clearly identifies us than the one behind the table most people don't see that just says something about connecting to religious and spiritual groups. I remarked that while many people do indeed pass us by, I also see most of them pause and read the banner, which is increasing our visibility, and I think is a good thing. My colleague disagreed. He said he preferred the days of the past when we were in a different location in the resource fair, closer to the tables students have to visit, so we had more students fill out our on-line contact form because they either didn't realize it wasn't mandatory or they felt awkward declining us after we'd given our invitation. While it is true we did have more people sign up, none of them ever showed up to the churches or groups they indicated on the form. I did not mention this to my colleague.

Instead, I responded by saying I'm not sure the goal of our being present at orientation is to get large numbers of students to fill out our form. I said we have to remember no student comes to orientation for the singular purpose of connecting to a church or religious group. They come to orientation to take placement exams, register, find out where they are going to live in the fall, meet roommates, that sort of thing. They aren't coming to meet us. We are here to let the students – and their parents- know there are religious opportunities here in Athens if they want to find them. Maybe because I had just read the Gospel lesson for today, or maybe because it isn't the first time I've read today's Gospel, I went on to say I am a firm believer in scattering seeds and our presence at orientation is a chance to scatter seeds. Our sign is just one way. I wear my uniform, my clerical collar, because it is another type of seed: a way for those who can read religious symbols to identify a priest, or a way to show there is someone different for those who can't interpret religious symbols. Even our interactions can be seeds. I don't expect anyone to come to Good Shepherd simply because I sat at the table in my priest collar; but maybe, someday, someone who saw the sign or collar, or something will remember we are here if they ever feel they need it.

My colleague responded to all this by stressing the rejection not just of us, but of religion. I told him that is a different issue; the problem of the growing secularization of modern culture here in America. I told my colleague how I meet loads of people who tell me they don't need to go to church because they are good. When we understand that is what the prevailing mindset is, we can appreciate how

difficult it is to impress on people the positive role religion and spirituality can play in creating a life of wholeness and wellness. And since they aren't coming into our churches much anymore, we have to figure out ways to get out of our buildings and go where the people are and show them Christ among them. That is why I believe it is so important we are at orientation; it's a good place to scatter those seeds.

My colleague was silent for a while. After a few students stopped by our table, he excused himself for a break, and when he returned, he was different. He didn't talk over me as much, and let me do some of the talking with the students. He started imitating some of the phrases I used, including welcoming students after they filled out our form. The next day he showed up in high spirits, talking with the folks at the table beside ours – which I've never seen him do before. He didn't talk over me as much and continued to change his approach of talking to the students to focus on them instead of on him. During those lulls in student activity, he did not complain once about being rejected. Instead he said something about how good of an opportunity this is to scatter some seeds. And when it was time to leave the table, we walked out together. Another first. The conversation turned more to small talk about wishing each other good summers, but I felt more like a colleague and an equal and I felt something holy happened.

I understand in the greater scheme of things and all the many problems in the world, this might appear to be a very small thing. But for me it felt like something not big, not large, but significant, and deeply holy. To me, it was a Kingdom of God moment, and it was beautiful and powerful and so very very good. This is not because someone I found frustrating started copying my style, or thinking I am right and he is wrong. That's not what this is about at all. In fact, most of what is different about us did not change. It's about how I did feel listened to, and how we did find common ground in the challenges the church faces. But I saw something in my colleague I hadn't before: I saw the pain he felt when those students passed us by. That rejection hurt him. That is why he had complained so much. Now he has a way to reframe or understand the rejection and the purpose of United Interfaith's presence at orientation, and it seems he finds this newness life-giving, energizing, maybe even the stuff of resurrection. And in a world of deep divisions, this was one tiny step closer to connection and bridge building. That is what made this a holy Kingdom of God moment. And it was a seed I didn't see growing at first.

It was the parables in today's Gospel emerging from the dusty pages of scriptures into the very real and very vivid world and showing us that God is not impressed by the big and beautiful. God is mightily fond of the small and the possible. That is what God chooses and blesses, every time.

And this is mighty good news for any of us who consider ourselves small or insignificant or powerless to effect change. Or any of us frustrated by the size of a parish, or ministry, and believe the secret to solving any parish's problems is to get bigger. To those who understand growth as only exponential, today they are offered Gospel insight that growth can happen differently; scattered here and there, taking root slowly and in ways we might not see at first. Today's parables of Jesus caution us to reconsider what we mistake for annoying weeds might be God's kingdom getting underfoot. Today's parables put a different spin on those small annoyances growing into large frustrations, for perhaps that is one of the purposes of the Kingdom of God: to frustrate those systems or institutions or mindsets that strive to provide stability by separating or isolating people to certain places instead of letting them grow into God's dream for us all.

And for those who feel helpless or hopeless when facing all the problems and injustices in the world, and feel we are too small to have any affect, please remember the seeds that you have as followers of Jesus and the mighty potential you have when you are courageous enough to speak up in ways that don't attempt to force your way but scatter the seeds you have been given. There is no telling how or when they will grow, but the point of Jesus' parables isn't that we force growth to happen, we let God's Kingdom sprout and grow in us, around us, through us, and that is how things change. It's true these changes might seem small to some, but that's good news too, because while God's Kingdom might look small to some, we must never underestimate its power to grow in any place, even one we might deem unlikely. You already have such good seeds. I hope you scatter some around.