

Scripture: Mark 4:30-32

Message: The Promise of Great Things

January 1, 2012; Bethel CRC, Brockville, ON

Brothers and Sisters in the Lord Jesus Christ:

Do you recognize the name of Mohamed Bouazizi? Maybe, if you have followed the news or the reviews of this past year. Mohamed Bouazizi was a 26-year-old street vendor who lived in the Tunisian town of Sidi Bouzid, 125 miles south of Tunis. On a Friday morning in December 2010, he set out for work, selling produce from a cart. Police had hassled Bouazizi routinely for years, his family says, fining him, and making him jump through bureaucratic hoops. On December 17, 2010, a cop started giving him grief yet again. She confiscated his scale and allegedly slapped him. This was a final straw in his frustration with government callousness against an ordinary citizen. He walked straight to the provincial capital building to complain, and got no response. At the gate, he drenched himself in paint thinner and lit a match to put himself on fire.

This radical act by a single person in a small town in a country most of us never heard of became the catalyst for the protests in Tunisia. These protests spread to Egypt and Libya and led to what has been called “The Arab Spring.” Other protests have happened in Spain, Greece, London England, Syria, and Russia.

Then there was the single blog post on July 13, 2011 from the Canadian-based Adbusters Foundation. It proposed the idea of a peaceful occupation of Wall Street to protest corporate influence on democracy, the absence of legal repercussions for the bankers behind the recent global financial crisis, and a growing disparity in wealth. This blog post was followed up with an ad in their magazine and a suggestion for the protest via their email list. “Bring a tent,” the ad said. From that, the “Occupy” movement was spontaneously taken up by people all over the world.

Even *Time* magazine has identified their person of the year for 2011 as “The Protester.” Protest, or we might say, change, often begins, as it did in December 2010, with one person, or a small group. Look at what an impact it has on the world!

This worldwide protest movement is an illustration of how something can start small and have a significant impact. This is the message Jesus is giving in this parable. Jesus is teaching us how God is at work in our world. Jesus speaks of it as “the kingdom of God,” which is God’s active and ever-present rule in this world.

It’s not a question of *whether* God is at work or not. He is. Remember the celebrations of last Sunday? It was Christmas Day. God came into the world in the person of Jesus. Jesus lived and died and rose again and ascended to authority in heaven. This is God at work. He loves the world and wants to bring all things and all people into a glorious and gracious relationship with himself.

How does he do that? Well, like a mustard seed. Here is a tiny seed that grows into a

tall tree. We must not get hung up on the technical correctness of the mustard as the smallest seed or the full-grown plant as being called a tree. The point is the smallness and seeming insignificance of the beginning which ends up with great results.

The kingdom of God, God's activity, his presence, his influence for change and hope, may not seem like much, but it grows and expands and becomes a great blessing to all who are part of it. The little band of disciples following a transient preacher would become a powerful influence in the world. Jesus was saying to those who first heard this parable, "Have patience, exercise faith, keep on praying, and keep on working. God's program cannot fail." Jesus is saying the same thing to those who have come afterward.

We must live and serve in that confidence. It is a personal confidence. "He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion." God is continuing to shape you, to make you into the person he wants you to be. He is continuing his work of making you more like Jesus.

It is also a challenge to Christians and the church to continue sowing the seed of God's word and kingdom. It is a challenge to proclaim the kingdom of God, the active presence and work of God, in all areas of life. We do not do so looking for immediate results and victories. We must be faithful, believing that God will bless the efforts begun in His name.

The kingdom of God is not some *future* age of blessing. We do not live our lives waiting for something that is to come. Then this world becomes a place that we would want to get rid of or get out of as quickly as possible so that we can have the real thing. We wouldn't care about what happens in this world, nor would we do anything for it. No, the kingdom of God is here, already now, as we look forward to the perfect, future kingdom.

Nor is the kingdom *only* something that is in the hearts of believers. Then we would put all of our energy into taking care of our inner spiritual life. The kingdom of God is present and active in the world around us, impacting our everyday lives.

God is living and active and moving and working his influence in the world right now. While we are God's servants in building and proclaiming the kingdom, the success of the kingdom does not rest on our efforts alone. The power and growth of the kingdom is within itself, like a seed. The life and identity of the plant is within the seed. God makes his kingdom grow. And the kingdom will come to completion in God's time.

As God's people, we must see the kingdom everywhere around us. We do not see God's kingdom as simply a social or political order. It does not come with proper governments and duly elected officials. We do not fight to bring in the kingdom with our own victories. God's kingdom comes and we are received into it.

God calls us to make its influence known. The kingdom of God is his ever-present rule over all creation, making all things right. It is growing, drawing more and more people under God's gracious rule. See how God is part of how you do your daily work or studies, how you treat your employer or employee or customer or teacher or students. See how the rule of God

influences how your walk fits with your talk, how your Sunday worship expresses itself in daily living, in how your lifestyle is consistent with your profession to be a Christian. See how God's work to make things right influences your care for creation, and your respect for those who are of a different race or nationality. See the seed growing into a tree, with room for all.

Think of this new year that is ahead of us. Today is the first day. It is only one day. Tomorrow is another day. It is only one single day. When you put all the days together, you get a whole year. When you put the years together, you get a lifetime. What will you do with today? What will you do with tomorrow? Think about that as you wake up each morning. This is the day that the Lord has made. How will I serve God today? How will I be part of building his kingdom?

It doesn't have to be some flashy religious expression or profound and radical statement. It is a small seed that grows into a tree.

What small act of kindness will you do this year that will be part of making this world into the place God intends it to be?

What conversation will you have? What listening ear will you provide for a few minutes?

What financial contribution will you make? What small increase in your weekly or monthly giving will you make? Oh, what's a dollar a week or \$5/month increase? Well, if 100 people did that small thing, it would add up to \$6000 in the year. Is god calling you to give more?

What ordinary thing will you do to make a difference?

Mohamed Bouazizi did not know that his action would trigger the Arab Spring. It was an individual, isolated action, done out of frustration.

We might never realize how the things that we do are making a difference in the world. What we do realize is that our actions are not individual or isolated. We are living our lives as part of God's active rule in the world. We are part of an already, ongoing revolution We know is that God is at work. His kingdom, his active and ever-present influence is at work in the world. The tiny seed is growing into a tree. The good news is bringing hope and peace and joy and blessing into the lives of more and more people.

That simple action that you are involved in is part of extending God's gracious renewal in this world.

That's what we can look forward to this year. It is God's promise of great things, the great things that he is doing, through us. Are you willing to offer yourself, in this new year, to God, to be involved in the work he is doing in Brockville or the community where you live, in Canada, in the world?

I'm just one person. Yes. And you are part of a larger movement, God's kingdom, God's work in his world.

Amen.