

# Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: April 22, 2018  
Sermon Title: Revolution and Christianity  
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe  
Scripture: A Revolutionary Scripture Litany

**Leader:** Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them wherever you are. Write them on the doorframes of your houses.  
(Deuteronomy 6:4)

**Congregation:** *Thou shalt have no other gods.  
Remember the Sabbath by keeping it holy.  
Honor your mother and father.  
Do not give false witness.  
Thou shalt not covet anything that is not yours.*  
(Exodus 20)

**Leader:** Blessed are the meek.  
Blessed are they that mourn.  
Blessed are the merciful.  
Blessed are those who are persecuted.  
(Matthew 5:3-5)

**Congregation:** *Love your enemies.  
Turn the other cheek.  
Go the extra mile.*

**Together:** *Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. And love your neighbor as you love yourself. All the law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.*  
(Matthew 22:37-40)

*Holy God, you have tried to help us turn the world upside-down for centuries. You gave us Jesus to show*

*us a true revolution of spirit, attitude and life built on love alone. May our faith yet revolutionize our world, and let it begin here, now, and with us.*

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## **Introduction:**

Good morning. We are going to start today's worship with something quite different: to make sure you're awake, to get your attention, and to emphasize today's theme: [The Beatles' song, "Revolution," plays]

Alida and I have had some fun discussions around how to advertise our Wednesday night lecture on "Russian Christianity and the Revolution of 1917."

In the days and weeks leading up to Easter, a lot of our Church publicity material featured the stern face of Lenin, proudly backed by the hammer and sickle, staring out at you, inviting you to Church! "Should we be doing that?" we wondered. "Do we want Lenin with the hammer and sickle in our Easter bulletin? On our Web site? Our Facebook page?" All in good fun, since we are truly excited about the lecture.

Last fall we did a lot of emphasis on the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation and what it has to do with us. Well, this is the 100th anniversary of the Russian Revolution that swept the universe, that shook the universe, the world of geopolitics, the world of economics, and, yes, the world of religion. As part and parcel of the Communist Revolution, the very idea of religion, faith, was attacked. Christianity was persecuted. Churches were closed or destroyed. Atheism was endorsed, pushed, nurtured, enforced. Generations of Russians and then Soviets, and then the whole Eastern Bloc, and then beyond to China, North Korea, and more, generations were brought up not only without faith but also anti-faith.

The ramifications reverberate today. In a strange, paradoxical twist, 100 years later, Russia is ruled by a former KGB agent whose regime is wedded firmly to the Russian Orthodox Christian religion. His political despotism firmly linked to a national religion of Christianity has Putin's "Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval." Wednesday's lecture is important and timely. I don't pretend to know much about Russia or the Russian Revolution or even the Russian Orthodox Church. I do know a thing or two about revolution. So today's sermon looks, in an awkward and controversial way, at the role of Christianity in revolution, good and bad.

Think of this sermon is my two-cents' worth, and it may not even be worth that much; but if it makes your head spin, well, that's a revolution right there.

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Here's how the Bible describes the trial of Jesus. From Luke and John, "They led Jesus off to Pontius Pilate, accusing him, saying, 'This man is subverting our nation . . . He opposes Caesar and claims to be king.' Pilate asked, 'Are you king?' Jesus said, 'Yes.' Then the crowd insisted, 'He stirs up the people,' and, they added, 'Anyone who claims to be king opposes Caesar.' Then Pilate handed Jesus over to be crucified." (Luke 23:1-3; John 19:12-16)

In other words, Jesus was executed as a real revolutionary, for sedition, treason, insurrection, rebellion. He "stirred up the people," "subverted the nation," "opposed Caesar," and "claimed to be king."

The word "revolutionary," or better yet the idea of "revolutionary," is in the eye of the beholder; is usually defined by the winners; and is subject to historical revisionism, romanticism, and pop culture.

Look at our own "Revolutionary War," our "American Revolution." We love it, honor it, celebrate it; its heroes and images forever engraved in our national psyche. George Washington, kneeling in prayer at Valley Forge. The farmers of Lexington and Concord firing "the shot heard round the world." Crispus Attucks, the first black man, the first person killed in the Boston Massacre. The Boston Tea Party. The Continental Congress. Nathan Hale, about to be executed by the British, declaring, "I only regret that I have but one life to lose for my country." These are our patriots from our Revolution, and we love them.

Fidel Castro, not so much. This week the last Castro left the Cuban government. In the 1950s the Castro brothers were revolutionary heroes, popular, iconic, victorious. Then, ideology, fanaticism, bloodshed, oppression made Cuba a pariah state, with now 60 years of enmity with us. Their revolution and their revolutionaries are not O.K. with us.

That's the nature of revolutions. We don't mind doing the revolting. We just don't want it done to us. Jesus's revolution was popular with his followers. Remember Palm Sunday? Pontius Pilate wanted none of it. Remember Good Friday? But here's what revolutions have in common, the famous ones (USA, Russia, China, France, Cuba) and the not-so-famous ones (Toussaint's Haiti, Ho Chi Minh's Vietnam, and Simón Bolívar's Venezuela), what's in common is they all rose up, they all rebelled against some status quo. Things as they were weren't right, or just, or tolerable. Things had to change.

In Christian terms, we call it conversion. You're living one kind of life. It's not going well. It needs change: conversion. You convert from being one kind of person to another kind of person. Hopefully better. Not always.

In political terms, we call it revolution. Your country is living one kind of life, it's not going well, it needs change: revolution. You revolve from one kind of nation to another kind of nation. Hopefully better. Not always.

But where does revolution come from? And why does a lot of revolution turn on us, on religion, on Christianity?

For today's sermon, I'm going to beat up on us a little, on Christians, on the West, on religion, and ask what we did to make the ground fertile for revolution. With the Wednesday lecture as impetus, sure, I'm thinking about the Russian Revolution.

The Russian Revolution in particular, Communism in general, swept Europe, swept Asia, enslaved nations, slaughtered millions, bred and spread atheism, and is enjoying quite a revival nowadays, if not in name, in principle.

Authoritarian egomaniacs who mock the press, sideline the judiciary, silence the opposition, control the economy, threaten and co-opt tradition, culture, religion—such regimes are multiplying.

But why? What's the attraction? Why throw over, throw out some of the very things we hold dear? Why, in Spain, in China, and France, in Russia, did revolution turn so quickly, so violently on the Church, on Christianity, on clergy, on Christians? Why in places we consider cultured, civilized, even Christian, when the forces of revolution were unleashed in the name of freedom, why were we such an immediate target?

When Alida and I were in Paris a couple of years ago, we worshiped in a lovely Catholic Church one Sunday night. The Church was packed. We couldn't get a seat. When we left, we saw a historic marker out front saying this was where dozens of Catholic clergy, priests and nuns, had been killed in the French Revolution. Now, we just got back from two weeks in Spain—Madrid and Toledo—and one afternoon we walked into a lovely Church. We sat and prayed, lit some candles, admired the art, and then noticed a relatively new side chapel, a little chapel dedicated to 30 Franciscan priests slaughtered together in the Spanish Civil War in the 1930s, among 500, yes, 500 Catholic priests and nuns killed.

We're not talking about the heat of battle or collateral damage. We are talking about a legendary, historic kingdom, Spain, proudly Catholic forever. And in the

20th century, young soldiers, probably every one of them baptized and confirmed in the Church, and one by one they lined up priests and nuns against a wall and shot them. What long-simmering hatred, what visceral loathing anger, malignant spite would lead to the willful murder of clergy and the sacking, stealing, destruction of Churches?

France, Russia, Mexico, Spain, the whole Soviet Bloc behind the "Iron Curtain," China—in each instance the zeal for revolution, the passion for change, the yearning for freedom took a hard and brutal anti-Christianity, anti-Church, anti-clergy turn. Faith was attacked. Churches were shut. Religion was restricted. Clergy persecuted on the heels of revolution. Why?

My purpose is not to rationalize or excuse revolutionary sins. The murderous excesses of left- and right-wing fanatics have no defense. But the 100th anniversary of the Russian Revolution is a good opportunity for us to look at how we shoot ourselves in the foot, how we set ourselves up as a target, how we foment revolutionary fervor. We can't always fix the mistakes of others, but we can try to do something about our own.

So here's my version of *The Idiot's Guide to Western Civilization*, or *Western History for Dummies*. For 1,500, 1,600 years, Christianity ruled the Western world. What we didn't own, we ruled; what we didn't rule, we controlled. Christianity was the power *of* the throne or the power *behind* the throne. From southern Italy to northernmost Scandinavia, from England and Ireland to Russia and all the places in between, Christianity ruled the roost, hand in hand with monarchs and dictators. We ruled. We chose. We overthrew. We influenced. We had the chance to do good or ill in Christ's name.

I'll give you a great symbolic example. As part of our trip to Spain, we took a day trip to Escorial, a beautiful town an hour outside of Madrid by speed train. Here's my point: El Escorial is a magnificent palace/monastery built *by* the king, *for* the Church, as an official residence for both, to assure adherence to their truth. Church and state joined at the hip, hand in glove, best buddies. Needless to say, when people rose up against one, they rose up against the other. Jump ahead to the 20th century, when Spaniards wanted to rebel against royalty and landowners, religion was both, so they got targeted as well.

A more contemporary example comes out of Central America, Guatemala, ruled ruthlessly by Rios Montt in the 1980s. Rios Montt, who just died recently, was a general, yes, and a Christian, yes, and even more so, a Protestant pastor. Yes, a pastor. So when peasants were killed, or "disappeared," when rights were trampled, who was the culprit? A general in service to the State? Or a Christian pastor in service to Christianity? How would the average person distinguish? The Reverend General Rios Montt used to round people up and tell them, "If

you side with us, we will feed you. If not, we will kill you.” Is that a Church message or a State message, when both are so intertwined?

To show you how complicated this is, let’s stick with General Montt in Guatemala. When he had election problems, he blamed his problems on leftist Catholic priests. When he became a Pentecostal pastor himself, he enjoyed the full-throttled support of Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson. And the general’s brother became a Catholic Archbishop in charge of the Church’s Human Rights Commission, which investigated the killing and disappearances done by his brother. In Guatemala, as in many places, Christianity has been revolting—in both senses of the word.

But too often down through history, Church and State have been indistinguishable, both with riches and power. And so, sad to say, when people rise up against the one, they easily take it out on the other.

So, at the end of this sermon, what am I saying? Simply, I’d rather be the revolutionary than the revolutioned against! I’d rather be the folks looking for what needs fixing than to be the folks everyone else wants to get rid of. I’d rather be the ideal that folks want to stand with than the reality folks can’t stand to be near.

There are places and times where Christians were on the right side of revolution. Paul Revere’s famous North Church in Boston. Churches in Central America, including the martyred Cardinal Romero and the Maryknoll nuns in El Salvador. The Catholic Church with Solidarity in Poland. Young Protestant martyrs in Czechoslovakia. Lutheran Churches in East Germany before the Berlin Wall fell. Courageous Churches right here in New England in those heady days of America’s Revolution. The underground Churches suffering today in China.

Christianity may have a long history of being on the wrong side, but we also have a glorious history of daring boldly to stand on the right side.

Indeed, this nation was long a hotbed of revolution, settled by lots of disgruntled religious folks, would-be troublemakers, who stood against the Caesars of their day. The Pilgrims and Puritans of New England, the Quakers of Pennsylvania, the French Huguenots of New York, the Catholics of Maryland, and when the bell tolled in 1775 and 1776, Americans were ready for revolution. We weren’t afraid of the idea, we weren’t put off by the idea. Our Scriptures were full of revolution, of revolutionaries, and revolutionary theory.

The great figures of the Bible, many of whom stood tall and strong against the regimes of their day: David was anointed king of Israel while Israel still had a

king. He was hunted by loyalists, he hired out to the enemy as a mercenary. Moses led a slave rebellion against Egypt, a true rebel, a partisan insurrection. Paul was repeatedly arrested as a threat to law and order, as an enemy of the state. And Jesus was nailed to the Cross as a self-styled "King of the Jews," a threat to Rome.

We know rebellion. You heard it in our Scripture Litany, the revolutionary monotheism of the Book of Deuteronomy, the foundational, definitive text of Judaism: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one." No one had ever heard that before. You heard it in Exodus's Ten Commandments that order a respectful society, that honors family, honors truth, honors others. No one thought that way before. You heard it in Jesus's words turning conventional wisdom upside down, "blessing the mournful, the meek, the persecuted." And daring us to always "go the extra mile." No one acted that way before. You heard it in the revolutionary texts of Jesus, more revolutionary than Karl Marx, than the "Thoughts of Chairman Mao" or the guerilla images of Che Guevara.

"Love God," Jesus said. "Love everybody else as much as you love yourself." We believe in revolution that lines people up alongside us, not up against the wall.

## "Revolution"

The Beatles

*You say you want a revolution  
Well, you know  
We all want to change the world  
You tell me that it's evolution  
Well, you know  
We all want to change the world*

*But when you talk about destruction  
Don't you know that you can count me out  
Don't you know it's gonna be  
All right, all right, all right*

*You say you got a real solution  
Well, you know  
We'd all love to see the plan  
You ask me for a contribution  
Well, you know  
We're doing what we can*

*But if you want money for people with minds that hate  
All I can tell is brother you have to wait  
Don't you know it's gonna be  
All right, all right, all right*

*You say you'll change the constitution  
Well, you know  
We all want to change your head  
You tell me it's the institution  
Well, you know  
You better free you mind instead*

*But if you go carrying pictures of chairman Mao  
You ain't going to make it with anyone anyhow  
Don't you know it's gonna be  
All right, all right, all right  
All right, all right, all right  
All right, all right, all right  
All right, all right*

Songwriters: John Lennon / Paul  
McCartney

And now, let's sing together our final hymns, remembering the seeds of our own Revolution, two great patriotic hymns:

**"America the Beautiful," No. 720,**

*O beautiful for spacious skies,  
for amber waves of grain;  
for purple mountain majesties  
above the fruited plain!  
America! America! God shed his grace on thee,  
and crown thy good with brotherhood  
from sea to shining sea.*

*O beautiful for heroes proved  
in liberating strife,  
who more than self their country loved,  
and mercy more than life!  
America! America! May God thy gold refine,  
till all success be nobleness,  
and every gain divine.*



*O beautiful for patriot dream  
that sees beyond the years  
thine alabaster cities gleam,  
undimmed by human tears!  
America! America! God mend thine every flaw,  
confirm thy soul in self-control,  
thy liberty in law.*

**"My Country, 'Tis of Thee," No. 721**

*My country, 'tis of thee,  
sweet land of liberty,  
of thee I sing:  
land where my fathers died,  
land of the pilgrims' pride,  
from every mountainside  
let freedom ring!*

*My native country, thee,  
land of the noble free,  
thy name I love;  
I love thy rocks and rills,  
thy woods and templed hills;  
my heart with rapture thrills  
like that above.*

*Let music swell the breeze,  
and ring from all the trees  
sweet freedom's song:  
let mortal tongues awake,  
let all that breathe partake;  
let rocks their silence break,  
the sound prolong.*