

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: April 29, 2018
Sermon Title: Post-Revolution
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.*

Introduction

Today's sermon picks up from last Sunday's. We had a great presentation in our Church on Wednesday evening on "The Russian Revolution and Its Impact on Christianity." So I set the stage for it last Sunday, and we'll take a fresh approach today.

The Russian Revolution, 100 years ago, came after 1,000 years; can you imagine that? One thousand years of Christianity and Russia uniquely linked, their identities and loyalties inseparable. If you were Russian, you were Russian Orthodox Christian, period. It's no surprise then, that when the Bolsheviks overthrew the State of Russia, they tossed out the Church of Russia as well, ushering in 70 years of brutal, official, dominant atheism.

Then came the collapse of the Soviet Union, the resurgence of religion . . . and then Putin. With Putin in power, his goal (no pun intended) is to make Russia great again, by his definition, and to do that he attached himself fully to the Russian Church, promoting himself. Himself as State and Church, as the only true protector of Christian values in the world today. This ping-ponging of Revolution/Counter-revolution, overthrowing the State, worshiping the State, persecuting religion, embracing religion, has been played out all over the world. China, France, Spain, Korea, Mexico, and to varying degrees many other countries.

Last week, with great sorrow, I had us look at how the Christian religion's own behavior, greed, persecution, lust for power, cruelty, resulted in revolutions that turned the force of their rage on the Church. Churches closed, destroyed, or stolen. Clergy imprisoned or killed. Christians persecuted, mocked. But I also reminded us that Jesus was a revolutionary. Moses, David, Paul—all revolutionaries, each one turning things upside down, inside out, leading rebellions large and small, personal and national.

Last week I reminded us of our own American roots in revolution. Our insurrections were all in rebellion against king and law and custom, shaking the world to its very foundation. We love revolution when it's ours. We honor it, celebrate it. We ended Church singing two great patriotic hymns made possible by America's determined revolution. At the very end I hinted at the revolution of Christianity if we take it to heart. That's where we pick up today.

Sermon

[The Rolling Stones' song, "Street Fightin' Man," plays]

The old Broadway musical, "1776," and the smash hit, "Hamilton," make revolution look fun, yet noble. Woody Allen's comedy, "Bananas," made revolution look cynical, predictable in its folly. The '60s, my era, made revolution inevitable, fashionable, urgent. Riots in our cities. Assassinations of revered leaders. Oppressive laws. National Guardsmen on college campuses. An endless unpopular war. Division everywhere.

As Buffalo Springfield sang,

*There's something happening here
What it is ain't exactly clear.
There's a man with a gun over there
Telling me I got to beware."*

Revolution was in the air.

Last week we started our Church service with the Beatles' song, "Revolution." It begins with the scratchy, discordant, unnerving music, then John Lennon proclaims,

*You say you want a revolution
Well, you know
We all want to change the world . . .*

*But when you talk about destruction
. . . you can count me out*

*. . . if you want money for people with minds that hate
. . . brother you have to wait
Don't you know it's gonna be
All right, all right, all right?*

Today we started with the Rolling Stones' "Street Fightin' Man," with its pounding, ominous beat, and Mick Jagger declaring,

*Everywhere I hear the sound of marching, charging
feet, boy
'Cause summer's here and the time is right for fighting*

*in the street, boy . . . the time is right for a palace
revolution . . .*

*Hey! Said my name is called disturbance
I'll shout and scream, I'll kill the king, I'll rail at all his
servants
Well, what can a poor boy do
Except to sing for a rock 'n' roll band
'Cause in sleepy London town
There's just no place for a street fightin' man."*

Each song is "call and response." There's a call for revolution, and each band responds: *no, not that way*. The Beatles seem to opt for a more peaceful, idealistic solution. The Stones just want to rock 'n' roll. Revolution invites such contrast.

Indeed, real Christianity always provides a stark contrast. In my days with Habitat for Humanity, I traveled the country, and much of the world, doing work projects, always leading to strange encounters. In Nicaragua, during their civil war, I was sitting in a little café high in the mountains in a contested area, with Ollie North's Contras all around. A man at the next table put his hand on his gun, looked me in the eye, and asked, "Are you a Communist?" I said, "No." He took his hand off his gun, smiled, and said, "You must be a Christian. Only Communists and Christians come up here."

I had a similar experience in Central Africa, in the Congo, again during civil war, where I got caught in a huge street protest, guns everywhere, effigies and flags burning, fists raised, and a group approached me menacingly, waving machetes: "Are you Cuban?" they demanded. Again, what's the right answer? I guessed "No" and added the French word for missionary. The people began cheering me, "This is a Christian from America, *from America!*" Again, they knew only two kinds of foreigners: Communists or Christians. Each doing revolution in their own way. And I mean that.

The Christians I knew in Nicaragua and the Congo and I were every bit as revolutionary as Nicaragua's Sandinistas or Castro's Cubans. "We all planned to change the world," as Lennon sang, to turn things upside down. That's a revolution, right? To turn, change, alter something. We Christians, and the Communists, we intended to alter behavior, attitude, priorities, ways of thinking, ways of being.

Jesus certainly wasn't shy about it, or vague. He called for a radical change in us, in religion, in society. His was a revolution from the ground up and from inside out. He wasn't toppling governments, staging coups, arming rebels, or

shouting slogans. "My kingdom is not of this world," he said, "the kingdom of God is within." "I have come that you might have life and life abundant." "Love God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind. Love your neighbor as yourself." "Love your enemies." "Turn the other cheek." "Go the extra mile." "Be meek." "Be merciful." "Forgive, forgive 70 times seven." "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." "Do unto the least as you would do for me." "Feed the hungry, clothe the naked, give drink to the thirsty. Visit the lonely."

And in quick order, he kicked the profiteers out of the Temple, he elevated and affirmed women, he touched the untouchables. And, well, he revolutionized our way of thinking about "the law," "social responsibility," "taxes," even "demons." "Let he who is without sin cast the first stone." "Render under Caesar what is Caesar's." "Quiet your anger and lust." "Look for ways to be neighborly beyond your circle." Jesus launched a revolution in thinking and being and believing, forging all of it together into a worldwide movement that in our Church we call "Christlikeness. I'm keeping all this "revolution" talk alive because I really do think it is useful to see our Christian faith, our "Christlikeness," for the radical thing it is.

Nowadays, Christianity is sort of vanilla, or just part of the landscape; or it's so judgmental and ugly that it's silly. There is no "wow" factor to us, no "aha" moment with today's Christianity. We're not upsetting apple carts, status quos, or equilibrium. And some of that is a result of progress. It's no longer revolutionary to feed the hungry. It's no longer radical to touch untouchables. It's no longer rebellious to promote peace, justice, equality.

In my lifetime, all three of those things were treated as revolutionary, radical, and rebellious. But now, some basics of Jesus's revolution have become mainstream not only in Church but also in society.

But the real work, the harder work of Jesus's revolution is unfinished. It's our inside work, our interior, ourselves. Islam, especially our world's problem with Islamic terrorism, has popularized the word "jihad," which means "struggle." The terrorists call their terrorism "jihad," so we are left thinking that every time some mass murderer blows up a market, drives a van through a crowd, or kills civilians, that's Islamic jihad. What that is is a perversion of a fairly reasonable, noble idea: the struggle to live one's faith fully.

To do so, the Koran highlights two jihads. The "lesser jihad" refers to legitimate defensive military war to protect Muslim people. Remember, that's the "lesser jihad." The "greater jihad" is the everyday struggle to live faith fully in the face of constant temptation, distractions, pressures. The Koran recognizes that is the greater struggle, the tougher battle. In ourselves.

We would agree, wouldn't we? Trying to live a Christlike life at work, in the family, around the neighborhood, on the commuter train, at school, in the voting booth, among friends—not easy! With ethical dilemmas facing us, with economic pressures, with family decisions, with the pervasive influence of mass social media—and we're supposed to stay on the straight and narrow?

Jesus's teachings about personal behavior are a total revolution from the behaviors of the day. I've already mentioned mercy, forgiveness, peacefulness, self-control, sacrifice, and love, love, love. And in case you missed it, more love.

Some years ago I took a course at Harvard with the legendary Harvey Cox, on "Liberation Theology." Liberation theology grew out of the revolutionary turmoil in Latin America in the '60s and '70s, and it included my personal mentor, Orlando Costas. Yes, it had some Marxist economic theory, but the "liberation theology" I encountered firsthand was fully Christian, fully evangelical, fully mission-centered, fully Biblical, with a full-blown belief that authentic Christlike life and authentic Christlike Churches must impact the society around them.

So, in my course at Harvard, Dr. Cox took us through Latin America and the images of Jesus leading the revolution, laying down his life for the poor, standing with the oppressed, turning his back on brutal powers, bleeding, bruised, bold, sacrificial. He actually did a slide show of paintings and posters and graffiti, all Christ-centered, political, activist, Jesus changing the world. But then he flashed a slide up on the screen: Jesus, with a bandolier of bullets crisscrossing his chest, a machine gun in his arms. This image was plastered on walls all over Latin America, and as fast as they were put up, people tore them down. They'd go up again, and be torn down again. The people, the Christian people. Christian, oppressed, poor, revolutionary people rejected this militant, machine-gun-toting, weaponized, menacing Jesus. That wasn't their Jesus. Violence is the easier jihad. Grab your gun, kill your enemy, wash your hands. No sweat.

But love? Forgive? Look in the mirror? Change your own heart? Be Christlike? That's sweat. That's work. That's revolutionary.

In my new book, *Water Into Wine*, there's a short story called "Tracy Lee," a fictionalized slice of my life in the mid-'60s: 1966, to be exact. I was working in a Church in Brooklyn, sharing space with a mysterious Vietnam veteran, Tracy Lee, who was some sort of community organizer hired by the City to keep things calm.

Here's how I describe us in my book: "An unlikely job had me scrambling to the Church where I met Tracy Lee. Along with "fuggedaboutit," Brooklyn was known as the Borough of Churches. This Church dominated the landscape. And in that hot summer, Churches were the heartbeat of the city, the seawall against the rebellion percolating on rooftops, those tarpaper beaches where anarchy was planned. Guys like Tracy Lee and me, do-gooders of various stripes, we were the foot soldiers of the revolution, whether Jesus's or Che's."

In my story, and in my memory of that summer, each of us tried to make a difference, one person at a time, turning away from violence, from despair, from anger, from isolation. One by one, with love spoken and unspoken, with patience, humor, and intervention, we tried to create a little revolution of love in that urban jungle during a season of hate.

All I've done these last two Sundays is to take the occasion of the guest lecture on the Russian Revolution to expand our understanding of the role of religion in revolution. And to take some of that language and apply it to our efforts to affect the world. I co-opted one revolution to explain other revolutions to prep us for our own revolution in transforming the world around us. But perhaps the key to Jesus's revolution is that he makes it so personal, so very intimate, one on one: you and the next person you encounter.

Forty-five minutes ago we sang our opening hymn, "Take My Life and Let It Be Consecrated, Lord, to Thee." We sang, "

*Take my life, and let it be
consecrated, Lord, to thee . . .
Take my hands . . .
Take my feet . . .
Take my voice . . .
Take my lips . . .
Take my silver and my gold . . .
Take my intellect and will . . .
Take my love . . .
Take myself, and I will be
ever, only, all for thee.*

That's Jesus's weapon for revolution, your life transformed into something most extraordinary. Now we close with the end result of such revolution, as we sing Hymn No. 608, "I Would Be True":

*I would be true, for there are those who trust me;
I would be pure, for there are those who care;
I would be strong, for there is much to suffer;*

*I would be brave, for there is much to dare;
I would be brave, for there is much to dare.*

*I would be friend of all—the foe, the friendless;
I would be giving, and forget the gift;
I would be humble, for I know my weakness;
I would look up, and laugh, and love, and lift;
I would look up, and laugh, and love, and lift.*