

If you're ever around Boston, you might want to give yourself a day or two to visit a little suburb about twenty miles away, the town of Concord. Events that took place there in the 18th and the 19th centuries revolutionized the world.

On April 19, 1775, the first instance of armed resistance by colonialists to British rule took place in a skirmish at sunrise eight miles away in Lexington. British troops moved on to Concord to search for colonial military supplies. Later that morning, the militia engaged them at Concord's North Bridge in the Revolutionary War's first battle. Today, tourists can visit the site and walk across a replica of the bridge.

On the side of the river where the British soldiers assembled stands a monument that was dedicated on July 4, 1837. One of Concord's leading citizens, Ralph Waldo Emerson, had been asked to write words for a hymn for the occasion. That poem, now known as "Concord Hymn," was read aloud and then sung by a choir at the Independence Day celebration.

On the other side of the bridge is the Minute Man Statue, which commemorated the hundredth anniversary of the battle in 1875. Inscribed on the base of the statue is the first stanza of Emerson's "Concord Hymn":

By the rude bridge that arched the flood,
Their flag to April's breeze unfurled,
Here once the embattled farmers stood,
And fired the shot heard round the world.¹

In addition to Emerson, three other well-known American literary figures lived in Concord during the 19th century: Louisa Mae Alcott, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Henry David Thoreau. Like the Minute Men before him, Thoreau was a revolutionary, but he was one who used words to wage his battles.

"On July 24 or July 25, 1846, Thoreau ran into the local tax collector, Sam Staples, who asked him to pay six years of delinquent poll taxes. Thoreau refused because of his opposition to the Mexican-American War and slavery, and he spent a night in jail because of this refusal."² As the story goes, when Emerson heard Thoreau was in jail, he rushed over to visit and said, "What are you doing in there, Henry?" Thoreau answered, "What are you doing out there?"

¹ *The Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: The Modern Library/Random House, 1950), p. 783.

² *Wikipedia* article about Henry David Thoreau.

“The next day Thoreau was freed when someone, likely to have been his aunt, paid the tax, against his wishes.”³ Thoreau’s essay *Civil Disobedience* inspired Mahatma Gandhi in the struggle for India’s independence and Martin Luther King’s use of nonviolent resistance against segregation in America.

Our readings for today are like that: they are revolutionary. The prophet Micah tells us that God requires us to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God. The Beatitudes build upon Micah’s revolution of justice, kindness, and humility. Under the reign of God, Jesus says, the meek will rule the earth. Writing to the church in Corinth, Paul continues the revolutionary theme: “not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are...”

Paul speaks of Jews demanding signs, i.e., miraculous demonstrations of power. He writes that all the rest of the world wants wisdom. But what God gives us in Christ appears to be neither. We think we know power and wisdom when we see them. But God has chosen to wrap power and wisdom in a puzzling package - in the crucified Jesus. The message of Christ crucified, Paul says, trips up the strong and the wise.

The message of the cross was and still is revolutionary. The Greek word Paul used which our translation renders as stumbling block is *skandalon*, from which we get our English word, scandal. Paul didn’t back down from confrontation, but gloated that the proclamation of Christ crucified was offensive and downright scandalous to people. He said it was part of God’s plot “to reduce to nothing things that are...” The message of the cross was the means by which this holy revolution would succeed, eventually reducing to nothing all the powers that were opposed to the reign of Jesus.

The idea of the cross being scandalous or offensive may be hard for us to relate to since in our culture, the cross is a decorative symbol. We have beautiful crosses made from wood, ceramics, and various metals. We hang them on our walls and above our altars. We dangle them around our necks and from our ears. But none of these artistic efforts change for a moment the reality the cross represents. The cross of Jesus absolutely is scandalous and revolutionary. Paul was not being overly dramatic, but was simply telling it like it is. The book of Deuteronomy says “When someone is convicted of a crime punishable by death and is executed, and you hang him on a tree, his corpse must not remain all night

³ *Ibid.*

upon the tree; you shall bury him that same day, for anyone hung on a tree is under God's curse." (21:22-23a) Since Jesus was convicted of a crime punishable by death and was hung on a tree, wasn't he under God's curse? Paul had turned the Deuteronomy text upside down with his scandalous message: "we proclaim Christ crucified... the power of God and the wisdom of God."

If you really want to understand the impact Paul's preaching about the cross must have had on his audiences, try to imagine what you would think if you had come to church this morning and found a hangman's noose or an electric chair hanging above the altar instead of a cross. The cross has become an acceptable piece of decoration over the centuries. It was not always so. How preposterous it actually sounds even today to proclaim that faith in a criminal's death by capital punishment restores our relationship with God. How would you feel about a preacher who held up a hangman's noose and said, "Believe in the gallows!" If you can imagine how weird and offensive this might sound to us today, then you have an idea about how Paul's preaching about the cross would have sounded in his day and time. To describe the cross as the ultimate sign of salvation was not only a stumbling block - it was offensive, scandalous, and mind-blowing. It was revolutionary. It challenged the cultural mindset of its day like the Civil Rights marches of the 1960s and the Women's March last weekend.

Have you ever wondered why people like Peter, Paul, and Martin Luther King, Jr. spent so much of their time in jail? Why were they always running into conflicts with the law? They were in jail because the heart and soul of the gospel is subversive - justice, kindness, and the meek ruling the earth were and still are major threats to the powers that be.

One of the important ways Western culture from the time of the Greek and Roman Empires to this day has made meaning is by assigning blame. Socrates was charged with corrupting the youth of Athens with his philosophy and was executed. Jesus, who was charged with blasphemy and fomenting rebellion against the emperor, also was executed. We need lawyers, judges, and juries to help us determine who is to blame, who is at fault. Justice is done when we assign blame correctly and impose an appropriate penalty for the offense. The gospel challenges us to discover justice in kindness and in living by faith, hope, and love. This, as Paul points out, is foolish and scandalous to the world. Even though blame was incorrectly assigned to an innocent man who also happened to be God's Son, the Messiah did not turn away from carrying the blame for everyone: Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Having been falsely accused and convicted, Jesus was crucified, died, and was buried. That would take care of the problem - or at least the powers that were in place at the time thought so.

But it didn't turn out that way. Pontius Pilate, Herod, and the Roman Empire are all ancient history now. But with every baptism like Patrick's today and every act of grace, mercy, and forgiveness inspired by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, the rule of Christ continues to spread and grow.

As the first stanza of a great old hymn puts it:

Jesus shall reign where'er the sun
does its successive journeys run;
his kingdom stretch from shore to shore
till moons shall wax and wane no more.⁴

In raising Jesus from the dead, says Paul, God has shown the world's wisdom to be pure foolishness and the world's power to be of no consequence. God will get the last laugh. In due time, the power of God's love in Jesus will be fully revealed.

Today's readings remind us that God intends to turn our world upside down and calls us to become partners in this project of holy sedition and revolution. This was God's call through Micah, Jesus, and Paul. It has echoed down through the centuries in people like Thoreau, Gandhi, and Martin Luther King, Jr. Time and time again, God's foolishness turns out to be wiser than human wisdom. Time and time again, God's weakness turns out to be stronger than the means used by worldly powers to oppress people.

Paraphrasing a friend and colleague of Emerson named Theodore Parker, Martin Luther King Jr. famously observed: "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." So we continue doing works of justice, kindness, and love in the spirit of Micah and Paul and in the name of Jesus. We trust Jesus' word that a blest and happy day will come at last when the meek finally do inherit the earth. So we look for the life of the world to come when the loving reign of Christ appears in all its fullness and glory.

⁴ *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, "Jesus Shall Reign," hymn 434.