



**“A Practicing Citizen”
Sermon by Eric Liu • Civic Saturday
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We are in a season of miracles and faith.

It’s the fifth day of Hanukkah, and still the oil burns. It’s nine days till Christmas, when for unto us a child will be born. And it’s been four days since Doug Jones was elected United States Senator. Roy Moore is proof that the Lord works in mysterious ways. But the voters of Alabama – especially the African American voters who overrode every obstacle and deterrent – remind us that some miracles are wrought by women and men.

We are also in a season of traditions.

Festivals of lights, latkes and Menorahs, Messiah and Nutcracker performances. I’ve always been attuned to the presence and absence of traditions. My immigrant parents didn’t have a playbook for celebrating the holidays. We took our cues from TV specials and school concerts and advertisements. From popular culture. We were not Christian but every December we brought a big cardboard box up from the basement, assembled our tree, limb by color-coded limb, and decorated it. Then we had Chinese food. We were not Jewish but my Jewish neighbors and friends in suburban New York taught me to identify with persecuted underdogs kindling their beliefs. Then we had Chinese food.

We are also today in a season of belief.

Or, at least, we should be. For as much reverence as Americans this time of year are taught to display toward the ancient miracles and traditions, we spend precious little time during the shortening days of solstice asking just what we believe and why.

Eleven years ago, my friend Nick Hanauer and I asked ourselves that question, and the result many months later was two books, *The True Patriot* and *The Gardens of Democracy*. From those books emerged Citizen University. Yet those texts are not an ending; they are, like our Constitution, a never-ending beginning. The question – *what do you believe and why?* – should never be finally answered. If you and I are to live like citizens, we’ve got to ask the question anew each day.

When belief becomes a habit or a reflex, an unthinking unfeeling reaction to other people’s unthinking unfeeling reactions, you get the politics of today. But when belief is a *practice*, a stretching and a straining, a stress test and an array of adjustments, you

get something more like a yoga class: presence, confluence, and the certainty that you'll have to do it all again tomorrow to stay limber. This is the shape of a *new* politics.

Yoga is an interesting case. How many people do you know who say, "Yoga is my religion"? I know as many who say baseball is our religion. And three members of our team – Katherine, Arista, and Ben, who recently tied for first place at Harry Potter trivia night at Neumo's on Capitol Hill – they might say Harry Potter is their religion.

But what do we mean when we say that?

A religion provides a moral framework for choice and an ethical standard for action. A religion provides shelter and respite from the suffering that suffuses human life. A religion offers a source of purpose and explanatory power in a world whose motor force is randomness. A religion provides a community and a set of rituals that root a rootless soul and that challenge the individual to be bigger than her self and her ego. A religion enshrines love and thus makes hope and human flourishing possible. A religion gives tangible institutional shape to an unseen spirit of connection and interdependence.

Humans are wired to seek belief and belonging. For billions of people, including some of you, religion takes the form of church or mosque or temple. It takes the form of prayer to a deity or deities. For others, including some of you, religion takes the form of the X when we say, "X is my religion." There is of course an infinite number of Xs.

But as the scholar Karen Armstrong wrote in her book *The Great Transformation: The Beginning of Our Religious Traditions*, every faith of what's called the Axial Age – the seven-century period of spiritual genius when Confucianism and Daoism took shape in China, Hinduism and Buddhism in India, and the three monotheistic faiths of Abraham in the Middle East – every one of these Axial Age faiths boiled down to the Golden Rule. To honoring the stranger. To the practice of compassion.

In the thirteen months since we started Civic Saturday, we've been asked from time to time why we talk about this gathering as a civic analogue to church, synagogue, or mosque. We ask ourselves. Why do we speak of civic religion, when some people are uncomfortable with any kind of religion? And what do we mean by that term, exactly?

I'd like to examine these questions with you today, and consider in turn the what, the why, and the how of civic religion.

What Is Civic Religion?

Let's start with the what. Civic religion is the set of beliefs, texts, practices, rituals, and responsibilities that shape our ideal of civic life – that is, our best lives as citizens, as political actors and authors of our community and country.

It is not religion as God-centered worship. Nor is it what Jean-Jacques Rousseau called *civil* religion, by which he meant a generic theism under which the state would enforce a belief in God, reward virtue, punish vice, and promote tolerance. It's certainly not the tinpot theocracy of a Judge Roy Moore, who nailed the Ten Commandments to the wall of his Alabama courtroom like some idiot Luther.

Nor is it what the American scholar Robert Bellah described in a famous 1966 essay about the biblical roots of much of American political iconography: a city on a hill; Providence and Great Awakening and Manifest Destiny; first the colonists and then later the enslaved as Israelites in exodus from Egypt; and then Lincoln, a martyred Jesus who prophesied and made possible the rebirth of freedom. What Bellah calls American *civil* religion is the Christian leitmotif stretched across the frame of American myth.

What I call American *civic* religion is not about Christianity at all. It is about our secular creed, deeds, and rituals of citizenship. It is the *creed* of values and norms stated at the founding of this nation and restated whenever our fragile republican experiment has teetered toward failure (as it does now). It is the record of *deeds* that have fitfully and unevenly brought those values to life. It is the *rituals* that memorialize those deeds and that make the deeds repeatable across the generations.

That creed starts with the Declaration and the Constitution but it extends in every direction and dimension that evolution and inclusion have taken it. The proverbs of Poor Richard's Almanac. The psalms of Walt Whitman. The parables of Zora Neale Hurston and the lamentations of Billie Holiday. The homilies of George Bailey.

Danielle Allen, in her many-layered book *Our Declaration*, performed an intensely close reading of the Declaration of Independence and the conclusion she came to is this: freedom and equality, so often seen as ideas in tension, are in fact the double helix of our civic DNA. True freedom requires equality, she argues. Equality not of means but of dignity and of recognition in the eyes of the law: what she calls "equality of agency." Without that, freedom is merely a shell. And equality doesn't come easily.

I've always believed that the most overlooked part of our country's civic creed wasn't written until after the Civil War, after the end of slavery but before the betrayal of emancipation. It's the Fourteenth Amendment, ratified 150 years ago next year.

Let's open our pocket Constitutions and read Section 1 aloud together:

All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the state wherein they reside. No state shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any state deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.

American civic religion is John Lewis girding himself as he crossed Edmund Pettus Bridge to ensure that no state, and certainly not Alabama, would deprive him of the

privileges and immunities of citizenship of the United States, of his claim to equal protection of the laws. American civic religion is Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton and all the women of the Seneca Falls Conference using the Declaration of Independence, with the words “men *and women*” in their Declaration of Sentiments for women’s suffrage and full citizenship. American civic religion is Gordon Hirabayashi openly defying the order to register at an internment camp and welcoming prosecution so that his case could go all the way to the Supreme Court, where he lost, until his conviction was overturned by the U.S. District Court here in Seattle in 1986. American civic religion is Edith Windsor successfully challenging the Defense of Marriage Act after her wife died and helping pave the way to marriage equality.

American civic religion is every time we march for justice. Every time we sing for justice. Every time we lay down in a die-in at City Hall to protest the death of our homeless neighbors in Seattle. Every time we stand up in a town meeting with our member of Congress to show them who’s boss. Every time we pick ourselves up after we lose an election or a policy fight. Every time we reclaim our agency and rediscover our power through acts of widening the circle. And every time we recall those acts in a catechism of historical reckoning.

I call this civic religion rather than just simple citizenship because our entire American experiment is an audacious statement of civic spirit and a continuous act of civic faith. We are nothing but promises on parchment and a willingness to keep things going. After their fateful actions, Lewis and Stanton and Hirabayashi and Windsor had no idea what would happen next, just as the signers of the original Declaration had no idea when they pledged their lives, their fortunes, their sacred honor. They each took leaps of faith.

Many who leapt were felled. Many who leapt were lynched. Many who leapt were deported. All who leapt leapt not alone but with others. Not just with thoughts and prayers but with lawyers and organizers. And in none of their cases was that faith redeemed in a clean immediate way. And still we leap. It takes years, sometimes decades, and we fight and lose and win and fight again.

As Donald Trump put it in a self-consoling tweet after Jones beat Moore, “It never ends!”

And this takes us to our second topic: why civic religion matters.

Why Civic Religion Matters

Democracy, when it’s working, is a game of infinite repeat play. It never ends! We call this gathering “a civic analogue to church or temple” because we believe that it’s necessary in the face of such unending uncertainty to provide a ritual structure for belief in the possibility of democracy.

Why do we deliberately echo the elements of a faith gathering? Because that language, those forms, these rituals and habits all resonate on a deep level. We believe at Citizen University that all people – even unchurched Seattleites – *especially* unchurched Seattleites – yearn for the fellowship of neighbors and strangers. Isolation breeds despotism, as Tocqueville knew. When the soul of our country is threatened by hate, we invoke love. We kindle a connection to common purpose and a bigger story of *us*.

And we believe that those mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave, to every living heart and hearthstone, all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union when again touched, as surely as they will be, by the better angels of our nature.

If you recognize those words, you're in the right place. If you *don't* recognize those words, you're in the right place.

Civic Saturday has struck a chord and we are now taking it national with events around the country and with a new Civic Seminary that trains people to lead these gatherings and build these civic congregations in their own towns. In these darkest of days, in a time when politics is so fiercely polarized, when traditional religion fuels so much fundamentalist fanaticism, we want to appreciate anew the simple miracle of democratic citizenship. Look at the world. Self-government is a miracle.

This stuff matters not simply because it answers a universal and timeless yearning for shared purpose. It matters here because it locates us atomized amnesiac Americans in the broad scheme of history and in a larger weave of morality. It matters because the norms and institutions of democracy are being corroded from within and without.

I recently got to know the Reverend William Barber, one of our generation's most fierce and effective civil rights leaders, who has been leading the Moral Mondays movement in North Carolina. That movement started with weekly mass citizen protests against the rigging of the legislature by Republicans and against the subsequent gutting of the state's safety net and voting rights and civil rights laws.

Those citizens have been fighting on many fronts. But beneath all those fights was the gerrymandered legislative map. So Barber helped to mobilize an army of everyday North Carolinians and activists and lawyers to get the rigged map overturned and to force a brand-new legislature into being next year. It has taken them six years.

With that kind of patience and persistence, Reverend Barber looks at what's going on nationally and says that this is hard but it is not new. He reminds us that Steve Bannon was around in 1877, when white supremacists took over Congress and put an end to Reconstruction. Richard Spencer and the tiki torchbearers of Charlottesville were there in 1921 when nativists rigged the immigration system to block almost everyone who wasn't from western Europe. And Donald Trump was in the Oval Office in 1942 when the internment of Japanese Americans got underway.

Putting today's fights in the context of history might make some people feel dispirited. *We're still fighting these same fights?* But Barber does it to give us heart: *We've fought and won these fights before.* And he does it to remind us that there's no quitting. Ever.

Barber is less interested in the language and tools of his professed Christian faith than he is in forcing his fellow Americans to live up to our civic religion. His is a deep, eyes-wide-open kind of patriotism. And perhaps the best statement of that kind of patriotism came a century and a quarter ago in another time of nativists and Know-Nothings, when Carl Schurz, a German immigrant who became a general in the Union Army and then a United States Senator from Missouri, took on the nationalists of his day. They were saying, "My country, right or wrong." Schurz replied that *true* patriotism is "My country – when right to be kept right, when wrong to be set right."

Think of that as the Golden Rule of Citizenship. And a never-ending obligation. A healthy American civic religion challenges us to live up to our creed, to reckon with the tensions and the hypocrisies, to do so with a knowledge of universal truths and the universality of human dignity, to be inclusive of every kind of person who is willing to abide by those truths and precepts, yet to maintain a sense of uncertainty about how best to do that. As Lincoln said in another part of his Second Inaugural, "with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right."

Which brings me to the final part of my sermon, about how to practice this civic religion.

How to Practice Civic Religion

William James was a pioneer in the new field of psychology at the turn of the 20th century and part of the American philosophical school called pragmatism. The pragmatists held that the worth of a belief cannot be measured by its origins or its claimed origins; it can be measured best by its practical effects.

In his classic book *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James applies the test of pragmatism to religion itself. Ask not whether a conversion experience originates in the chemistry of the brain; ask what it yields. Ask not whether you believe Joseph Smith had a vision in which an angel revealed golden plates that would become the Book of Mormon. Ask instead whether a belief in the Book of Mormon over subsequent generations has led to socially beneficial results. Many social scientists, looking at Mormon levels of service, family cohesion, and philanthropy, make the case that it has.

The idea that a religion is only as good as its effects can apply to American *civic* religion as well. The Constitution is worth caring about, the words and deeds of Lincoln and the like are worth venerating, only to the extent that they lead to a truly beloved community. James at one point observes that war can summon in a people common purpose and self-sacrifice and ingenuity and he says a society needs the "moral equivalent of war." I say we need the moral equivalent of religion, and that is what civic religion is.

So how do we practice it so that its effects are truly beneficial?

First, believe in tension. American civic life is a set of built-in tensions, of perpetual arguments that cannot and must not be resolved. Liberty and equality are in tension. Effective national government and strong local control are in tension. Pluribus and unum, diversity and unity, are in tension. So are rights and responsibilities. Inhabit the tension. Know how to argue both sides. Know that elements of both are always necessary. Know that better arguments can bring us together.

Second, believe in doubt. Lincoln's phrase, "as God gives us to see the right," is a statement of humility, echoed half a century later by Judge Learned Hand, who spoke of the spirit of liberty as "a spirit that is not too sure that it is right," that seeks to understand the minds of others. We have too much righteous certainty now, too little understanding. There are no infallible original meanings and no inerrant interpretations. There's only broken, irrational, half-blind humans. The Founders are proof. And they asked not for the idolatry of future generations but for our skeptical commitment.

Third, believe in gradations. Fundamentalism, whether of the left or right, is the greatest threat to American civic life today. Dismissing people as insufficiently woke or as fake conservatives – purging for purity – is both a cause and an effect of our contemporary tribalism. The writer Anand Giridharadas puts it powerfully: "Is there room among the woke for the still waking?" We've got to make room. Otherwise, we silence and alienate too many bystanders. We stop too many journeys of mind-changing before they can start. And the only beneficiary of that is Trumpian authoritarians, who depend on moral flattening, on this obliteration of a citizen's capacity to discern shades of gray.

Fourth, believe in coalition. The Alabama election, like the election nationwide a month ago, showed that a "coalition of the decent" is emerging. It took not just the heroic efforts of black Democrats but the critical presence of some white Democrats and the calculated abstention of white Republicans to stop Roy Moore. When democracy is threatened by illiberal bigots at home and abroad, ideological litmus tests are a luxury. Coalition is a necessity.

Fifth and finally, believe in justice *for* all using methods *from* all. That means nurturing the spirit of mutuality and interdependence that George Bailey calls on in the middle of the bank panic. It means combining *your* civic power with that of others to change the systems and structures of law and policy so that more people can flourish and thrive.

Now, that may seem like a prescription for a progressive agenda. But it's not inherently. Again, return to the effects test of the pragmatists. Empowering poor families of color to end their dependency on welfare and take more control of their economic and civic lives by activating social networks and using small financial incentives to change behavior – that may sound to you like an approach with right-wing origins, but it's a left-winger named Mauricio Lim Miller who's doing it, through an Oakland organization called the Family Independence Initiative.

Devising proposals for low-income workers in the gig economy to have a portable set of health and disability benefits – that may sound like it has left-wing origins, but it's a right-winger named Eli Lehrer who's doing it, through a libertarian think tank in Washington called the R Street Institute.

Origins do not matter as much as results. And results come only from trying, from thinking freely and enabling everyone to experiment and from the hybrids that emerge from that liberty and those experiments. That's the lesson of pragmatism. It is the spirit of American civic religion. And it brings me to a concluding thought about practice.

Conclusion

I am not a practicing Christian. I am not a practicing Jew. I am not a practicing Muslim or Buddhist or Hindu. I am not a practicing atheist either.

I am a practicing citizen of the United States. I know my own mind. I know what I have inherited from being Chinese, what part I have inherited from being American, and what part I have inherited from being Chinese American. I know what I believe and why. I know how to put those beliefs into action. And I know how to amend those beliefs and actions, as the evidence of my eyes and yours gives me to see the right.

All of us can do this, if we take seriously the opening words of the Constitution. And all of us must. Stand if you can and join me then in the reading of the Preamble:

“We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.”

We do it together. Our Union is imperfect. Justice comes first. We do it for posterity. Imagine a society that operated on these principles. Imagine a country that lived by these ideals. We have the power to make such a miracle happen. It just takes practice.

Readings to Precede the Sermon

Alexis de Tocqueville
From *Democracy in America*
Published 1835

Despotism, by its very nature suspicious, sees the isolation of men as the best guarantee of its own permanence. So it usually does all it can to isolate them. Of all the vices of the human heart egoism is that which suits it best. A despot will lightly forgive his subjects for not loving him, provided they do not love one another. He does not ask them to help him guide the state; it is enough if they do not claim to manage it themselves. He calls those who try to unite their efforts to create a general prosperity “turbulent and restless spirits”, and twisting the natural meaning of words, he calls those “good citizens” who care for none but themselves.

George Bailey’s Speech During the Bank Run
From *It’s a Wonderful Life*, directed by Frank Capra
Released 1946

You're thinking of this place all wrong. As if I had the money back in a safe. The money's not here. Your money's in Joe's house...right next to yours. And in the Kennedy house, and Mrs. Macklin's house, and a hundred others. Why, you're lending them the money to build, and then, they're going to pay it back to you as best they can. Now what are you going to do? Foreclose on them?... Now wait...now listen...now listen to me. I beg of you not to do this thing. If Potter gets hold of this Building and Loan there'll never be another decent house built in this town. He's already got charge of the bank. He's got the bus line. He's got the department stores. And now he's after us. Why? Well, it's very simple. Because we're cutting in on his business, that's why. And because he wants to keep you living in his slums and paying the kind of rent he decides. Joe, you lived in one of those Potter houses, didn't you? Well, have you forgotten? Have you forgotten what he charged you for that broken-down shack? Here, Ed. You know, you remember last year when things weren't going so well, and you couldn't make your payments? You didn't lose your house, did you? Do you think Potter would have let you keep it? Can't you understand what's happening here? Don't you see what's happening? Potter isn't selling. Potter's buying! And why? Because we're panicky and he's not. That's why. He's picking up some bargains. Now, we can get through this thing all right. We've got to stick together, though. We've got to have faith in each other.

Danielle Allen

From *Our Declaration: A Reading of the Declaration of Independence in Defense of Equality*

Published 2014

[M]aybe we're born into a world, for instance, ancient Athens, where all the men vote and move freely well beyond their homes, while all the women are largely restricted to their households and play no role in politics. Because things have been done one way for a long time, they seem natural. Because we grow up with them, they seem given, even though they might be changed.

Nature, in other words, isn't such an easy thing to grasp.

What happens, then, when what we know from abstract reflection conflicts with what we know from habit, as it did for Jefferson?

The history of the world suggests that habit is the more powerful source of knowledge. People are able to replace old habits with new ones, based on ideas that show them the truth lies elsewhere, only with great difficulty. Quite often they change only when forced by the people who are worst off under reigning conditions.