



**“Fear and Hoarding” – Sermon by Eric Liu  
Civic Saturday – June 17, 2017  
Town Hall – Seattle, WA**

Welcome. It’s great to be back with you at Town Hall Seattle. I want to begin today with a note about our friend Wier Harman, the executive director here who is a catalytic force of nature in the civic and arts ecosystem of this city. As some of you know, Wier is in the midst of some tough treatments for cancer. And so instead of our quiet prayers, I would like us to send him our very loud and raucous positivity and vibes of joy and energy.

So on the count of three, please join me in making noise for Wier! [cheers, joy!]

Thank you. I want to change things up today in some other ways as well. As those of you have been to previous Civic Saturdays know, this is the part where I give a sermon. The sermon is a key part of our civic analogue to church – perhaps the churchiest part. But we at Citizen University are always listening and creating and one of the things we sense is that in this age of participation that we are experiencing today, it’s not enough just to do straight old-school sermon.

So today we are experimenting with a modified sermon, in which I will share some ideas in three chunks, and after each chunk we will pause to talk to each other about those ideas and a common question that I’ll put to you and that we’ll discuss together.

The three topics I’d like to explore today are these: fear, scarcity, and responsibility.

## FEAR

I’ve mentioned at previous Civic Saturdays that in recent months I’ve come to be friends with Glenn Beck. Well, because I have been on book tour for much of the last twelve weeks, I had the chance recently to spend a day with Glenn in Dallas and went on his radio show and his television show.

As some of you know, Glenn has been making a very public pivot in recent months – not disavowing his positions on policy but taking responsibility for his role in making our political culture so toxic and for feeding the resentment and anxiety and raw hatred that helped elect Donald Trump. (Beck, to his credit, was never a Trump fan). And as part of

this responsibility-taking he's been engaging in public and on-air conversations with people like me, with whom he disagrees deeply on policy.

Over the course of our time on air we did disagree sharply, on everything from the minimum wage and trickle-down economics to transgender bathrooms to the Affordable Care Act. But what we did first, particularly on his long-form television interview, was talk on a different frequency.

I had observed that so much of our politics today is driven by fear. Trump voters voted their fear: of a globalizing economy that had stripped them of jobs and dignity; and of a demographic tide of young people of color and immigrants that is eroding the relative advantages of whiteness, straightness, and maleness. Of course, people who now resist Trump also are fueled by fear: fear of what he might do next to them – to us – or what he and his enablers in Congress are doing to our society and our planet.

And it's not just partisan fear. The police officer who killed Philando Castile was acquitted yesterday because the institutions of our country have enshrined a self-justifying story of anti-black fear: if black men are presumed dangerous, then dealing with a black man is inherently risky and perhaps life-threatening, and *therefore* killing a black man preemptively must be justified. This is the strange loop of racist logic by which juries determine what is "reasonable" fear.

It is also a reminder of why it must still be said: Black Lives Matter.

I was speaking about all these currents of fear flowing through and distorting our politics and Glenn Beck responded with a very simple question: *What are you afraid of?*

At first I answered in a political-civic mode, saying I was afraid that we are Rome, that the republic is done and we are collapsing in a heap of corruption and corrosion. But then he pressed me, really, to say what I was afraid of.

Because he pressed me, and because we had already spent some time together, I gave him a deeper answer the second time around. I told him that my father had died suddenly when I was 22, and that I have lived most of my adult life with a fear that none of this adds up; that life is random and cruel and purposeless. And this fear has been a motor force, driving me to make meaning and to make something that'll outlive me.

As I said this, I saw Glenn's eyes well up. And he then described to me his own personal fears, and the complicated relationship he'd had with his father and family growing up not far from here, and how so much of *his* desire to have a voice and to be part of something greater than himself had emerged from those circumstances.

We went on to argue, as I said, about many issues of the day. I am aware that he still runs a media empire that still relies for revenue on fear and alarmism coupled with

ignorance. My encounter with Glenn Beck did not make him a saint in my eyes. It only made him human. From then on it was not possible to demonize him when we disagreed because we had already humanized each other.

I give him all the credit because *he* invited *me* into that space of humanization. He asked me what I'm scared of, and I realized he meant it and wasn't setting up an ambush, and so I spoke from the heart. And now we are friends, not enemies, even if I am sure we will on many issues remain adversaries.

This is power. The power to set in motion a new normal. To turn the soil and weed the garden so that something better and healthier can grow in this plot. And now I'd like to ask you the same question Glenn asked me:

*What are you afraid of?*

I invite you to turn to your neighbor and take four minutes each speaking to this question, and then I will guide us in a short stretch of collective conversation.

[discussion]

## SCARCITY

One of the deep and often unspoken fears of our time, everywhere in the United States, is the fear of falling behind, and a sense that we are stuck in a zero-sum game where we must fight harder to get less. What's become clear from my travels is that it's not enough anymore to talk about how to boost opportunity. We also have to bust monopoly. And busting monopoly begins at home.

One of the positive developments of the last few years, at least compared to the years prior, is that we now have a national narrative of the 1% and the 99%. We are now paying attention to the fact that as a society we are experiencing the inevitable consequences of forty years of grinding inequality and concentration of wealth and the spread of episodic poverty deep into what used to be the solid middle class.

So it's good that today in our political lexicon we have the meme of the 1% and the 99%. But here's the thing. That meme lets most of us off far too easily. That meme makes it seem like only the 1% are blameworthy and the rest of us are innocent.

I've recently been very taken with a new book by the British scholar Richard Reeves called *Dream Hoarder*. You may have seen a piece he wrote in the New York Times this past Sunday called "Stop Pretending You're Not Rich." And his message is for most of the people in this room today.

In the United States today if your total annual household income is greater than \$116,000 you are in the top 20 percent. And what Reeves said in that piece and at greater length in his book is that we of the top quintile are the real problem. Yes, the richest 1%, who, after all, have reaped 95% of the gains of the recovery, are the most visible and identifiable perpetrators of hoarding and beneficiaries of game-rigging. But we in the 20% – the educated upper-middle class – are not innocent bystanders, much less victims. We too are perpetrators and hoarders.

Reeves lists an array of policies that have been put in place, some by government and some by the private sector, that enable the upper middle-class to hoard privilege and opportunity and to create what he calls a “glass floor” beneath us and our children. Here are a few examples:

- The home mortgage interest deduction, which gets more valuable the richer you are, and which fundamentally rewards those already privileged enough to be homeowners – which is getting painfully hard in Seattle – for being so privileged.
- College admissions preferences for the children of alumni, which are justified nakedly as a way to extract more giving from those alumni, reward the already privileged for being privileged.
- Exclusionary zoning that makes it harder for density and new forms of affordable housing to be created in neighborhoods designated for single-family homes.
- The so-called “velvet-rope” economy that is spreading like a rash through every sector but is perhaps most palpable in the airline and hospitality industries, where people with the means to fly enough and lodge enough rack up points – well, let’s call them what they are: privileges – to be able to move in comfort and with the little dignities that are denied to the masses.

*I can hear the objections now. I’m not rich! How dare you accuse me of hoarding – I am only doing what the law allows me to do, even encourages me to do. I know so many people who are so much more well-off than I am – why aren’t you shaming them? And what about you, Eric? Aren’t you just as guilty?*

Well, I am. But as I will say in the final chunk of this sermon, guilt isn’t the issue. Responsibility is. And here’s the thing. We live in a country where thirty-eight percent of Americans say they could not pay for a \$400 emergency without selling an asset or borrowing, and 14 percent could not pay at all; where 21 percent of children live in official poverty, which at \$24,000 for a family of four is a shamefully low bar; and where you are less likely to advance from the bottom quintile to the top than you would be in England – a country that still has lords and an aristocracy!

We live in a country, moreover, where there aren’t bright lines between the poor and non-poor but where 94 percent of those who earn between 100 and 150 percent of the official poverty line still fall into poverty for at least a month – and where this perpetual insecurity and the sense that work no longer pays is changing the psychology and the

will to fight of so many of our fellow Americans. We live in a country where people like those of us in this room, the great majority of whom have everything we need even if we don't yet have everything we might want, still remain stuck in a mentality of scarcity.

We are a long way from William Jennings Bryan and his loud warnings about plutocracy and being crucified on a cross of gold. But we are in danger of strangling ourselves silently with ropes of velvet.

Take inventory of your privilege, your capital, your wealth. I am not talking only about money and class. I am talking about white privilege, male privilege, heteronormative privilege, native-speaker privilege, college-educated privilege. I'm talking relationship capital, connections capital, reputation capital.

Be honest: we here today have so much.

And because we think we are products of a meritocracy in which hard work was justly rewarded by good schools and then good incomes, we feel not only the scarcity-obsession and the fear of relative decline that unequal times generate generally but also a very particular *defensiveness* and even righteousness about that scarcity mentality.

Here is the challenge that Reeves puts to me, and that we must now put to each other: To break this cycle. To lead by example. To do so not just in our individual and family choices but in how we engage as citizens to change *norms* and *rules* and *laws*.

And that's the order of operations, by the way: norms first. Our norms are the material of which our hopes and dreams and fears in civic life are made. For over a generation, the people of the United States have internalized norms that accept inequality as a given and are consumed with the anxiety of being cut out of the deal.

So I'd like to pause now for you to discuss with your neighbor:

*How and when are you affected by a scarcity mentality?*

[discussion]

## RESPONSIBILITY

If you aren't actively unwinding the upper-middle class privilege matrix that Reeves laid out, then you are actively perpetuating it. There is no such thing as being a neutral unwitting beneficiary of privilege. Not in these times.

But you might want to ask a simple question now: *Why?* Why on earth should I willingly yield advantage and be the sucker who allows someone to take advantage of me?

I believe that the reason to take inventory and then responsibility is not to absolve oneself of guilt or to indulge in charity. The reason why we must face and deconstruct compounded power and privilege is so that the entire society does not come crashing down around us. This is not altruism. It is self-interest properly understood. When you take stock of what you have, and realize you are in the world of haves and not have-nots, you face a simple binary: shall I hoard or shall I circulate? Hoarding kills – first those who are denied resources, and eventually the hoarders themselves. Circulation saves, enabling us all to thrive. This is Frost’s fork in the road, reimagined by Carson.

This is the logic of how the United States after World War II didn’t say “America First” and didn’t tell Germany and Japan to go fund themselves and didn’t retreat into isolation – but how instead this country’s leaders decided to bind ourselves to international agreements and alliances that limited our maneuverability, that funded the reconstruction of our defeated enemies, and that created our own competition. The logic was this: mutual aid makes both the giver and the recipient stronger and safer. We’re all better off when we’re all better off.

So what I am I doing to circulate my privilege? Some things, and not enough. I’ve got to do more. I just spent many weeks on the road talking citizen power to audiences that frankly already have some. I need to spend many more weeks talking with and teaching people who don’t and who can’t buy my book. I’ve got to do more than bring my lessons of civic leadership to places like Yale. I need to spend time in prisons, with people who want to enter the circle of citizenship again, and among migrant workers, who want to enter it for the first time. I can’t accept as a given the whiteness and agedness of so many civic engagement organizations. I need to bring more folks in, more new blood, more of my country.

Which is why beyond the circle of personal actions, I advocate as a citizen engaged in public policy for what I call a monopoly-busting agenda. Higher taxes on the incomes of the wealthy and the upper-middle class. Taxing capital at the same rates as labor. A robust estate tax. Baby bonds or a universal basic income to ensure that everyone starts life or career with a baseline of economic security. Flipping our upside-down system of tax breaks so that they don’t disproportionately flow to the affluent. Making it easier for people to make a living wage, whether by boosting the minimum or cutting away licensure requirements that create occupational monopolies. An end to alumni preferences in admissions. A draft, for either military or civilian service.

You may or may not agree with the elements of such an agenda. Go make your own. You may or may not have been engaged in similar conversations about *white* privilege and how hard and complicated it will be to deconstruct the power structure that privileges whiteness and punishes various kinds of non-whiteness. We are all at different stages of a journey of reckoning. But the reckoning is unavoidable.

So our final segment for conversation, which we will discuss in a moment after I conclude, will center on this question: *How can we take responsibility for making a more truly inclusive community?*

## CONCLUSION

It's commencement season, and so let me close today in that spirit.

We are called here to commence. We are called to make a passage. It is time for us in Seattle – this city that is becoming as unequal and technocratically self-satisfied as San Francisco – to grow up. To live like citizens. It is time for us in the United States – a nation whose elected leader is embarrassingly representative of our market-dominated, money-obsessed, soullessly self-dealing culture – to grow up.

And what does it mean for us, at this little moment of commencement, to grow up?

It means naming our fears and making it possible for others to name theirs – even those we claim not to like at all, those whom some in Seattle proudly say they are ignorant of – so that together we might learn to see each other and live together.

It means resisting the scarcity mindset and striving to become something bigger and more whole than a status-anxious petty hoarder.

Finally, it means taking responsibility for circulating power and tithing privilege at every fractal scale of our lives. It means having the wisdom to know that to yield some now is to advance more later. Together.

Let's begin. We have a city and a country and a future to set right.

## Readings to Precede the Sermon – June 17

**James Baldwin**

**From *The Fire Next Time* (1963)**

I imagine one of the reasons people cling to their hates so stubbornly is because they sense, once hate is gone, they will be forced to deal with pain.

**Williams Jennings Bryan**

**Democratic National Convention**

**Chicago, July 8, 1896**

There are two ideas of government. There are those who believe that, if you will only legislate to make the well-to-do prosperous, their prosperity will leak through on those below. The Democratic idea, however, has been that if you legislate to make the masses prosperous, their prosperity will find its way up through every class which rests up on them....

Having behind us the producing masses of this nation and the world, supported by the commercial interests, the laboring interests, and the toilers everywhere, we will answer their demand for a gold standard by saying to them: You shall not press down upon the brow of labor this crown of thorns, you shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold.

**Rachel Carson**

**From *Silent Spring* (1962)**

We stand now where two roads diverge. But unlike the roads in Robert Frost's familiar poem, they are not equally fair. The road we have long been traveling is deceptively easy, a smooth superhighway on which we progress with great speed, but at its end lies disaster. The other fork of the road – the one "less traveled by" – offers our last, our only chance to reach a destination that assures the preservation of the earth.