



**“Better Hypocrites”**  
**Sermon by Eric Liu • Civic Saturday**  
**University of Missouri-St. Louis • St. Louis, MO • August 10, 2019**

Thank you, Willis. My friend the Reverend F. Willis Johnson is the very embodiment of servant leadership. I quote him every few days. Five years ago, he was the pastor at Wellspring Church in Ferguson, across the way from the police station. When Michael Brown was killed and when the unrest and uprising began, Willis waded into the crowd. He kept people from harming themselves. He prevented chaos. He opened his doors to the young people whose tears were curdling into a desire for vengeance. He counseled, he cajoled, he organized, he converted rage into a commitment to social empowerment. To echo the title of a book he would later pen, he held up his corner. That’s what I quote all the time – the idea that the responsibility of a citizen, on days of no drama or days of catastrophe, is to hold up your corner.

If one hundred million Americans would decide to live by that creed, we would be a nation transformed. If just you and I would decide to live by that creed, and pass it on, we would be a nation transformed. *Hold up your corner*. That doesn’t require office or title or gray hairs or MLK-level magnetism. It requires only a predisposition to show up. As Ella Baker once said, “Strong people don’t need strong leaders.”

We at Citizen University work to build a strong people. We created this new ritual called Civic Saturday as a civic analogue to a faith gathering. It’s not church or synagogue or mosque. But it is about American *civic* religion – the values and ideals we profess to believe in as participants in this democratic republic – and about what it takes to build the muscles of power and character to thrust those beliefs into action.

We’ve been holding these gatherings from LA to Atlanta, Nashville to Des Moines to Portland, Maine. More importantly, we formed a Civic Seminary to train local catalysts like you to lead Civic Saturday gatherings of their own. In dozens of country towns and big cities, red places and blue, Americans are gathering just like we are this morning. They’re gathering to do something most of us most of the time are not invited to do: to make sense of our times in the company of others, to face the moral and ethical choices of this moment. To remember how to live like citizens.

Today I want to talk about remembering and forgetting, and when each is useful. Let me put it more sharply. Today I want to talk about how we can be better hypocrites.

Let me explain.

We in the United States carry the blessing of a creed and the burden of living up to it. The result is near-constant hypocrisy. Most other countries don't have founding documents and phrases that are objects of veneration, that form the basis of a civic religion. We do. But other countries can institutionalize all the sins and foibles of human nature, the tendency to elevate some and humiliate others, generation after generation, without ever worrying that they're betraying a set of national ideals. We cannot.

When Russians treat some of their countrymen like serfs, they're being Russian. When Americans do the same, we're being hypocrites. We're supposed to be better than that.

Hypocrisy requires memory and it requires forgetting. To be in this nation means we can never forget the creed. We can never escape it, even if we cannot recite it. When we regarded the body of Michael Brown lying on Canfield Drive for four hours, as officials of state did nothing yet prevented citizens nearby from doing anything, we regarded that tragedy through the lens of our creed. We remembered that all men are created equal. We remembered that we the people, to secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, did ordain and establish a Constitution. A Constitution we amended to promise equal protection of the laws. On some deep level and on what Ralph Ellison called "the lower frequencies," we also remembered that it has been the half the history of this nation to violate and degrade the spirit of the Constitution and Declaration.

"We have not a hundred miles between the Atlantic and Pacific which has not been the scene of an Indian massacre." So said H.B. Whipple, a white clergyman in 1881. We can say the same about the breadth of the state of Missouri and the sites of lynchings and the sale of humans as merchandise and the separation of enslaved families and the practice of everyday, liberty-killing violence against their disfavored posterity.

But if hypocrisy requires memory it also requires forgetting. It requires spinning elaborate narratives of justification that enshroud the actual past in a gauzy, tacky web of myth, fairy tale, and outright lies. I don't have to tell you, here in this slaveholding state that fought for both Union and Confederacy. The "Show Me" state? I can show you in every county and precinct of Missouri a white person today who will say slavery was a long time ago, who will say his immigrant forebears had nothing to do with putting down black people, and who will not see because he has never known or has forgotten that white identity itself was manufactured by law and by custom to make him and those like him American by default and everyone else presumptively outside the circle.

Yet not all forgetting is bad. In fact, for a nation to cohere, some forgetting is always necessary. The trick is not to forget too much. After the Civil War, when Reconstruction just got to be too hard and too stressful, white men of the North and South met in a conspiracy of forgetting. Let us rejoin as brothers, they said, and remember what we have indelibly in common, which is being not black and therefore American by default.

And beneath those boughs and bouquets of reunion and reconciliation entered the white-ego-protecting codes of Jim Crow and then the jingoistic imperialism of the Spanish-American War and the plains-clearing brutality of the Indian Wars throughout this territory. It's a hard trick, not forgetting too much.

That is why I chose our three selections of civic scripture today, and why I want to spend a moment reflecting on each piece.

Each reading reminds us that in the United States there is no possibility of not being a hypocrite in civic life. The only question is whether we can become better in our hypocrisy. And I don't mean better *at it*: more skillful liars or more subtle self-deceivers. I mean becoming better citizens in the midst of, in spite of, our predestined hypocrisy: more humble when we redeem our creed and more penitent when we lapse. More mindful of our never-ending duty to close the gap between our professed ideals and our actual, grubby, unwitnessed, self-dealing, self-comforting choices and omissions.

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The gap, the omission, is the poetic device of our first reading today. Tracy K. Smith recently completed a term as the Poet Laureate of the United States. She accepted the laurels not as an honorific but as a commission: like an officer of a civic army, she accepted billets to serve communities across this land. She taught poetry, her own and that of many others. She showed Americans by her example as a black woman that all our voices, past and present, unsung and oversung, are needed for our liberation.

She also showed us that poems are just words. By which I mean, *words of justice*. Incantations of the right, as God gives us to see the right. (Remember who said that latter phrase? Yes, Lincoln in his Second Inaugural).

Smith's poem "Declaration," which we heard today, is a masterpiece of reading and rewriting and excision and redaction. Every word in that short piece comes from the Declaration of Independence. She cuts sentences off halfway ("He has plundered our – ravaged our – destroyed the lives of our –"). Each start invites us to complete the thought not with an unnamed aggrieved British colonist in mind but with Michael Brown and Sandra Bland and Eric Garner and Freddie Gray and Philando Castile.

Why do we say their names? So that we will not forget. Forget what, though? We are called on this anniversary to do more than remember a specific oppression. We are called to unwind and deconstruct a *system* of oppression.

That means knowing what tools we have at our disposal. If you did not recognize the language from Tracy Smith's poem, you are leaving a necessary tool on the table. The words of "Declaration" the poem come from the part of the Declaration of Independence that is a long bill of grievances against the Crown. And the way she juxtaposes those words, that feeling in 1776 of intolerable tyranny coupled with a deep sense of betrayal

– for the King and Parliament were supposed to be *better* than that – this juxtaposition is powerful only because it turns our founding words against us in 2019.

This poem is a deft declaration of hypocrisy, an artful heartbreaking cry that ends midsentence, mid-migration: “taken Captive on the high Seas to bear –.” It is an amputation. It is also a reminder that in our wounded everyday lives we can use the words and promises of our creed to force this society to live up bind those wounds. Sometimes shaming will suffice. Other times direct concerted action will be warranted.

You know this. Ferguson’s city council and police force and St. Louis’s city prosecutor’s office are now more representative of and responsive to the people whom they were oppressing five years back. That happened because protestors turned into voters, activists into policymakers, bystanders into upstanders. You used tools of organizing, of rhetoric, of moral and patriotic appeal, of raw retail politics. Of power.

But you know as well that a mere shift in representation has not undone what law and custom took several centuries to do. History weighs heavily, invisibly. I felt it when I drove through Ferguson on an August afternoon four years ago. I felt the segregation – not just of Ferguson but of the whole St. Louis area. And I say this not to judge. For when I felt that, I remembered too the segregation of the city of Poughkeepsie, where I was raised, and the city of Baton Rouge, where my wife was raised, and the city of Seattle, which likes to think of itself as freed from history, facing only the future, but is as dyed in redlining and color-coded segregation as the rest of the map of the nation.

History weighs heavily. But that weight is compounded when we do not understand the way it is being told and used. Which brings me to the second text we heard today.

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Dred Scott was an enslaved black man whose enslavers had brought him from the slaveholding state of Missouri to the free parts of the adjacent Missouri Territory. Upon his return he sued in St. Louis, in the old courthouse across from the Arch now, claiming that because he had spent time on free soil he was no longer a slave. In 1857, the Supreme Court issued a domino series of pronouncements whose logic was inexorable – and led inexorably to the Civil War. The Court, led by Chief Justice Roger Taney, dismissed the case, holding that Scott did not have standing to sue in federal court.

Why? Because he was not a citizen of the United States. Why? Because he was black and blacks could never be citizens. Why? Because anyone enslaved or descended from a slave could never be a part of the people in “we the people.” Why? Because the Founders and Framers in the Constitution and all their local laws never contemplated that someone black could be one of them.

And from this chain of logic Taney added the most fateful link, which was to say that therefore even the Missouri Compromise of 1820, which had limited the spread of

slavery above the 36°30' parallel, was unconstitutional. Slavery simply could not be limited by Congress. Why? Because Congress could not legislate freedom – which was to say, Congress could not confiscate property in men. Taney thought he had resolved the slavery question once and for all. Instead he had recklessly lit the fuse of war and hastened the destruction of the Union.

You might wonder, if I call these readings that preceded the sermon “civic scripture,” why I chose a passage from this infamous decision. Isn't scripture supposed to be stuff we celebrate, the passages we memorize and rub like prayer beads to a high polish? Well, yes. And by that standard, if we are being candid, Justice Taney's opinion in *Dred Scott v. Sandford* is indeed American scripture. It expresses an idea that this country has long worshipped and that many of its citizens still do (including its president).

The idea is this: *White makes right*.

What this decision reminds us is that while we all have memory and we all have story, *power* is what turns memory and story into History with a capital H. In *Dred Scott*, Chief Justice Roger Taney used his power – abused his power – to enshrine a particular version of the story of America and of the United States.

Taney was a Maryland slaveholder. In his version of our national story, the polity of the United States was white in its origins and therefore must be kept white forever if we were to be faithful to original meanings. He was right about the first part – it's a matter of fact that the founding generation believed in white supremacy. It's why, as Taney points out, the Naturalization Act of 1790 limited citizenship to free white men. But as to whether it had to be kept that way forever, there were dissenting views.

There were the views of abolitionist activists like Frederick Douglass. There were the views of the anti-slavery politicians who created the Republican Party. And there were the views of the two justices who dissented from Taney's majority opinion. They noted that free black men had been voters in five of the thirteen states at the time of the Constitution's ratification – had voted *on* its ratification, which made them not only citizens of their states and of the United States but also co-creators of the Constitution.

Imagine if the dissenters had prevailed. A different memory, a different story, would have been elevated, one in which there could be no American history without African American history. One in which American law, American letters, American culture, American folkways would have from the beginning been understood as having black DNA. One in which black men and women were contemplated from the beginning as part of American posterity. But Taney chose to forget that story and to enshrine another. And, to quote Lincoln again, *the war came*.

I said earlier that Taney was a slaveholder. Yet that oversimplifies. He emancipated his slaves, giving pensions to those too old to work. When he was a young lawyer he defended an abolitionist and called slavery “a blot on our national character.” Was

Taney conflicted, confused, or a hypocrite? In his case, as in Thomas Jefferson's case, as in the case of every American who has ever lived, the answer is "all of the above."

In recent years, descendants of Dred Scott and of Roger Taney have met, embraced, spoken at public events in Virginia and elsewhere to commemorate the injustice that brought their families and fates together. Let me read to you from an article in the Richmond Times-Dispatch on April 3, 2019:

"You can't hide from the words that [Roger Brooke] Taney wrote," Charlie Taney said, standing a few feet from a statue of his ancestor.... "You can't run, you can't hide, you can't look away. You have to face them."

"A Taney bringing an apology to a Scott is like 'bringing a bandaid to an amputation,'" Charlie Taney quoted his daughter as saying on Monday. "An apology is not enough," he said. "But it is necessary."

And the article closes with Lynne Scott Jackson, Dred Scott's great-great-granddaughter, saying this: "We both have our sides of the story that blend very well." That is not the same, by the way, as "apology accepted." It's more like, "forget about it."

There is a beneficial form of forgetting that can open a path between rank hypocrisy and, well, less rank hypocrisy. That form of forgetting is asymmetrical, because its object is a history of asymmetric power. Charlie Taney's responsibility is to remember. Lynne Scott Jackson's responsibility is to forget. Our *collective* responsibility, upon hearing this story, is to rearrange the pieces of story and memory in a way that can be useful to the greatest number. To write a new story. Which brings me to Toni Morrison.

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That passage we heard today comes from *Beloved*, by my lights Morrison's greatest novel and one of the greatest ever written. It is the pivot in the closing scene of an improbable painful beautiful story of love and resilience. Why did I choose it as a piece of civic scripture? Because it is as improbable, painful and beautiful as the resilience and persistence of African Americans over 400 years. And because the yearning it expresses – to gather the pieces each of us has been broken into, to gather and recombine them in unimagined ways – is the yearning that defines Americanness.

As I read Morrison's obituaries this week, I waded through news accounts of the El Paso and Dayton massacres. I also read about that young white man in Springfield who went into the Wal-Mart days after El Paso donning body armor, a loaded semiautomatic rifle and 100 rounds, who sparked a panic and a police call, and somehow came out with his life. Talk about white privilege. "Open carry while black" has not been tested at scale in the state of Missouri. I suspect gun laws would change if it were.

Gathering pieces and making sense of them is what St. Louis and Ferguson have had to do these last five and fifty-five and 155 years. Putting together memories of memories – what Sethe, the protagonist of *Beloved*, calls “rememories.”

In 2015, a few weeks after the first anniversary of Michael Brown’s killing, I came to Ferguson and St. Louis. I felt it was important to come, to be present when there were no crowd, no media scrum. I met with faith leaders, AmeriCorps members, teachers, students, politicians. I went to Canfield Drive and I walked by that freshly restocked memorial mound of flowers and stuffed animals and handwritten messages.

Over breakfast at Cathy’s Kitchen in Ferguson, I met two educators from Teach for America, one of whom grew up in the area and had become an activist. Across the street was the “I ♥ Ferguson” store, and I met the two older white women running the place, who spoke sincerely of their pride in the city — but were equally in earnest when they said Ferguson was more than “those people who live in the apartment buildings.”

Later I met two older African American women leading YouthBuild St. Louis, who remembered well the days when they couldn’t have entered the restaurant where we met. A pastor in North City who has been leading night walks through the toughest neighborhoods — whose own son, a gang member, was recently shot. A former county commissioner and businessman who ran the state community service commission — a man from central Missouri who “speaks Bubba,” as he put it, and applies that skill to talking about race and poverty.

I want to share five reflections I wrote at the time, for they stand as calls to action now.

First, there is no substitute for meeting people face-to-face. All the media reports about Ferguson do not capture what it’s like to be there on a quiet morning, to sense what normal there is, to feel the space between people, to imagine what it’s like to be a white elder who grew up in one of the historic Victorian homes in town or a black child growing up now on Canfield Drive across the street from the makeshift memorial.

Second, without institutions or experiences that routinely bring people together across lines of race and class, citizens of a diverse community do not develop the habit of truly seeing each other. This is why I believe in national service. But it’s also why there’s deep value in the house meetings and coffee conversations that faith groups and others are organizing here. Seeing each other is a prerequisite for every other kind of citizenship. Joining a club or inviting someone to join a club *across the usual lines*.

Third, I disagree in part with a point Hillary Clinton recently made, in an impromptu discussion with a Black Lives Matter activist, that changing laws is important but changing hearts is not. Both are necessary. Each alone is insufficient. Changing hearts without changing laws is a failure of follow-through. But changing laws without changing hearts is a failure of imagination. We must end the mindset, implicit in so much of American life, that whiteness is the norm. This is work of spirit, of culture, of heart. It is upstream of law and policy. And it should be led more often by those who are white.

Fourth, it is crucial for the people in this region who do not have voice or power to learn how to build durable voice and power — through politics, elections, and policymaking. Yes, that is slow and often frustrating work. But it is how the structures of a multigenerational status quo of second-class citizenship will ultimately be replaced.

Fifth, Ferguson (and greater St. Louis) is a place, a particular place of the South and Midwest with its own local logic. At the same time, it is a test case for our country. A stark distillation of dynamics to be found across the land. Which is why, after the anniversaries and the protests and media coverage fade, it still demands our attention.

I'm a Chinese American child of immigrants who grew up in the white suburbs of New York and lives in a gentrifying Seattle. I too own a piece of Ferguson's problems. I too am a cause of the persistent segregation of St. Louis. I need to be part of the solution.

That's what I wrote four years ago. I mean it still. It is why I am here. I invite you to look at St. Louis and North County through new eyes. Look through the eyes of a newcomer to see what habit has blinded you to. Then remember you are not a newcomer. You have experience, and social capital, and people power. And you have responsibilities — including the responsibility to face what has kept you from fulfilling your responsibilities.

On that trip in 2015 I went to Busch Stadium for the first time. A friend with the Cardinals got me a seat behind home plate, and I was treated to an incredible game, a walk-off win that sent the red-clad crowd into a frenzy. It was during that last rally that I noticed that I was the only nonwhite spectator as far as they eye could see. I had come alone and I realized no one had spoken to me except for the server who took my hot dog order. Still, I got caught up in the game, and I loved being in this cathedral of baseball.

Today, my rememory of that night at Busch has a different tint. For one thing, I no longer have such warm and fuzzy feelings about stadiums full of white people wearing red caps. But the other thing that colored my memory is a report I recently read called "Segregation in St. Louis: Dismantling the Divide." It included a vignette about Shauna and Stephanie, two sisters, African American, who had grown up in St. Louis near Union and Delmar and then moved away to New York. One was an engineer, the other a theater manager. One became a Mets fan, the other a Yankee fan. When they retired, they moved back here. They got season tickets and Cardinals jerseys. But when Shauna went to games and cheered the big rally and turned around to high-five the white fans around them, she got nothing. "They would look at you like, 'What do you want?'" Stephanie recalled. After three years, they stopped getting season tickets. They'd come looking for a collective experience and instead got isolation.

Is the social exclusion of those sisters a violation of the Cardinal Way? Or its epitome? You know better than I do. Is it a violation of the American creed? Or its epitome?

At this very minute, we are ignoring our creed. *We* are. Not just those who carry torches in white nationalist marches. Not just those who write manifestos of hate against Latino

immigrants and then weaponize their words. Not just those who describe entire, great American cities as rat-infested hellholes. We, you and me. We who do not high-five newcomers at the Cardinals game. We who don't go to Cardinals games at all because we assume we won't be welcome. We who secretly or not even secretly don't mind ICE rounding up immigrants in the dead of night. We who don't vote after the crisis passes. We who are not doing all we can to break the grip of segregation, to challenge the customs and habits of assigning safety and second chances by color.

Segregation creates closed loop systems of thinking *Why bother?* Why bother sharing power, and why bother demanding it. Those closed loops imprison the privileged as much as the disfavored. They make everyone less powerful, less capable of thriving. But the opposite of segregation is not integration. Ferguson is statistically integrated. Shauna and Stephanie's box seats were integrated. The opposite of segregation is inclusion and hybridity. It is recognizing the essential impurity of our condition, and welcoming it. I contain good and evil. I contain multitudes. I invite them: black and white and Latino and Asian and Native American stories and the aches of amputations.

Before we can desegregate any part of St. Louis or any American city we must hybridize our hearts. We must imagine what it's like to be the other – not in a switching of shoes thought experiment but in the recognition that each of us *already is* the other.

"Imagining," Toni Morrison wrote, "is not merely looking or looking at; nor is it taking oneself intact into the other. It is, for the purposes of the work, *becoming*."

I'm not asking us to become saints. I am asking us to become Americans. Hybrid and hypocritical, trying, always trying to live like citizens. Forget the Roger Taney way: fake purity. Remember the Dred Scott way, the Tracy Smith way, the Toni Morrison way: intermingled, insistently complex, interrupted by failure. We all fail. If we are honest about it with each other, we can all fail better. That is the American way.

### **Readings to Precede the Sermon August 10, 2019**

**Tracy K. Smith  
Declaration, from *Wade in the Water*  
Published 2018**

*He has*

*Sent hither swarms of Officers to harass our people*

*He has plundered our –*

*ravaged our –*

*destroyed the lives of our –*

*taking away our –*

*abolishing our most valuable –*

*and altering fundamentally the Forms of our –*

*In every stage of these Oppressions We have Petitioned for Redress in the most humble terms:*

*Our repeated  
Petitions have been answered only by repeated injury.*

*We have reminded them of the circumstances of our emigration and settlement here.*

*– taken Captive  
on the high Seas  
to bear –*

**Excerpts from *Dred Scott v. Sandford*  
Majority opinion by Chief Justice Roger Taney  
Issued March 6, 1857**

The question is simply this: can a negro whose ancestors were imported into this country and sold as slaves become a member of the political community formed and brought into existence by the Constitution of the United States, and as such become entitled to all the rights, and privileges, and immunities, guaranteed by that instrument to the citizen, one of which rights is the privilege of suing in a court of the United States in the cases specified in the Constitution? ....

We think ... they are not included, and were not intended to be included, under the word "citizens" in the Constitution, and can therefore claim none of the rights and privileges which that instrument provides for and secures to citizens of the United States.

In the opinion of the court, the legislation and histories of the times, and the language used in the Declaration of Independence, show that neither the class of persons who had been imported as slaves nor their descendants, whether they had become free or not, were then acknowledged as a part of the people, nor intended to be included in the general words used in that memorable instrument.....

They had for more than a century before been regarded as beings of an inferior order, and altogether unfit to associate with the white race either in social or political relations, and so far inferior that they had no rights which the white man was bound to respect....

**Toni Morrison**  
**From *Beloved***  
**Published 1987**

Paul D sits down in the rocking chair and examines the quilt patched in carnival colors. His hands are limp between his knees. There are too many things to feel about this woman. His head hurts. Suddenly he remembers Sixo trying to describe what he felt about the Thirty-Mile Woman. "She is a friend of my mind. She gather me, man. The pieces I am, she gather them and give them back to me in all the right order. It's good, you know, when you got a woman who is a friend of your mind."