



**“Become America”
Sermon by Eric Liu • Civic Saturday
The Basement East • Nashville, Tennessee • March 31, 2018**

I’m so glad to be here at the Basement East, this epicenter of cool in one of the planet’s great cities of music. And I’m especially glad to be back in the state of Tennessee. I want to thank to our wonderful friends at Briteheart for partnering with us to bring Civic Saturday to Nashville.

My parents were immigrants who came from China by way of Taiwan. I’m from New York by way of Seattle. But I know a thing or two about the Volunteer State. I know, for instance, why your flag has three stars – one each for East, Middle, and West Tennessee; each region with its own folkways and feeling and topography. And while this is my first time in Middle Tennessee, it occurs to me that on my last two trips to the state I went to some significant sites in East and West Tennessee.

Let me tell you about them.

Six years ago, UT-Knoxville chose my book *The Accidental Asian* to be the text that all incoming first-year students had to read and discuss. It’s not every day that an SEC school makes everyone read a Chinese American’s reflections on race and identity. The best part of that visit was speaking to the five or six thousand students in Thompson-Boling Arena, that cathedral of hoops where the Volunteers and Lady Vols have made sports history so many times. I tried to get those young men and women to channel their pride for Tennessee and for America into a vision of our country’s purpose that’s about inclusion and diversity not as kindness or political correctness but as the way to field the strongest possible team. To win on the court. They were into it. By the end, they were cheering for these ideas. It’s the closest this five-foot-four dude is ever going to get to basketball glory.

Then last year, across the state in Memphis, I had a very different experience. I was meeting with educators from a nonprofit called Facing History and Ourselves. Facing History is based in Boston but their Memphis offices, I discovered, are across from the Lorraine Motel, where Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated. He was on the balcony of Room 306 when James Earl Ray murdered him at 6:05 pm on April 4, 1968: fifty years ago, next Wednesday. As some of you know, when you stand before the Lorraine

Motel on a quiet afternoon, you are transported: not to the past but to a future that was also assassinated that night; an alternate reality that never got to unfurl. The motel is now the National Civil Rights Museum and to stand there on Mulberry Street is to stand on ground that is civically sacred: sacralized by sacrifice, by bloody loss, but also by the promise, unmet still but still unextinguished, a promise of rebirth and redemption.

When I say “civically sacred,” I mean it. We are gathered here today in this hip venue for something we call Civic Saturday, which we describe, perhaps un-hiply, as a civic analogue to church or synagogue. And because we are gathering on what turns out to be Holy Saturday and the second day of Passover, I want to say a word about what this is and isn’t. Civic Saturday is *not* church or synagogue or mosque. But it is about American *civic* religion: the *creed* of liberty and equal justice stated at the founding of this nation; the record of *deeds* that have fitfully, unevenly brought those values to fruition; and *rituals* that memorialize and revivify those deeds.

We give Civic Saturday the shape of a faith gathering because democracy itself is an act of faith. We believe that in American civic life, as much as in anyone’s faith life, it’s vital not just to revere words on a page but to live up to them. To *embody* in practice a professed *spirit* of love and responsibility. This is why we sing together, why we talk with the strangers beside us, why we hear spoken word and readings of what you might call civic scripture, and why, with a music stand as my pulpit, I call this talk a sermon.

We started Civic Saturday in Seattle four days after the 2016 election and it has struck a chord. Now we’re taking it all over the country: New York, Atlanta, Des Moines, Detroit, Portland. We’ve launched a Civic Seminary to train dozens of people from small towns and large to lead their own Civic Saturdays. And for weeks, I’ve been excited to be in this town and in this joint. Nashville is not just the capital of country music. It’s a repository of American *memory*, encoded in song and Grand Ole structures. It’s powered by a *motivation* to convert pain and longing into beauty and glory. And it’s a place where people can reinvent themselves – be reborn, or at least get a *makeover*.

Well, today I’d like to reflect on these three themes – memory, motives, and makeovers – and how they shape our sense of civic purpose in America.

Memory

Why did I choose a Hank Williams song as our first reading today? Not just to pander to old-school country music fans. And not just because it captures the essential ache of our ruggedly individualistic society. But to rekindle a memory.

My father, Chao-hua Liu, was born in Nanjing, China in 1936. He and his family fled to Taiwan in 1949, when the Communists won the Chinese civil war. He came to the United States in 1958 to go to college at the University of Illinois. He worked for IBM his

entire career, climbing up middle management in Poughkeepsie, New York. He was diagnosed with end-stage kidney disease in 1976 and began home dialysis in 1977. He did that for fourteen years until he died suddenly in 1991 at the age of fifty-four. All those years, he had let only a few people know he was ill.

My dad had often been sick as a kid too, and spent long childhood days in the sickbed reading Chinese poetry and the Chinese classics. When he came to America, he was a sponge for new texts: the texts of American culture. And he passed down to me everything he had absorbed. Though I was the one born here, *he* introduced *me* to Hank Williams and Elvis. He taught me the rules of basketball and boxing, and led me to admire Dr. J and Muhammad Ali but not Isaiah Thomas and Sugar Ray Leonard, whom he mistrusted. Dale Carnegie and Donald Trump were on his bookshelf, alongside those Chinese classics. He delighted in Rodney Dangerfield. He shared late-night jokes about Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter and Dan Quayle.

My primary memories of my dad are of him laughing uproariously – he had a mischievous, corny sense of humor – or of him thinking hard before explaining something – he had a clarity of thought and expression that was layers deeper than English or Mandarin. This was a gift. For most of our time together, he was profoundly sick and he knew that his sickness would shorten his life. Yet my memories are not of his sickness or sadness or bitterness. He almost never showed any despair and he left no evidence of it – except, perhaps, one ambiguous fragment. After he died, I was going through his old jackets and found in the inner pocket of one a folded sheet of paper on which he had scribbled the lyrics of Hank Williams’ “I’m So Lonesome I Could Cry.”

What was the meaning of that? My eye went immediately to the line: “That means he’s lost the will to live.” Was this his private, folded-up cry of anguish? But then my eye went to another line: “The silence of a falling star/Lights up a purple sky.” And I remembered Hank Williams originally wrote this song as a spoken word piece, without a melody. And I realized that the poet and wordsmith in my father might have appreciated the song just for its spare beauty and craft.

I don’t know. I won’t ever know. If I wanted to, I could construct from that second-hand material an elaborate narrative about how the loneliness of American life made my father recall the pangs of the old Chinese poets and that Hank Williams sang that echo aloud for him. But that would be my story. It’d be a monument to my emotions and perceptions, not his. The true way to honor my father’s memory is not to enshrine it in a myth that reveals more about me than about him. It is to live my life and inform my child’s life with the useful and helpful parts of my father’s ethical DNA – his determination, yes, but maybe not the denialism that left our family unprepared when he passed; his courage, yes, but maybe not his prideful secrecy.

How do we prune and splice our ethical DNA? I’ve been thinking about this because your city has been reckoning with memory, personal and collective, and with the

meaning of monuments. I am inspired by your new mayor's proposal to nix a private development at Fort Negley and instead create a public park that would honor the enslaved African Americans conscripted by the Union Army into building a Union fort there. Hundreds of black men died in that endeavor, not as freedmen or heroes but as confiscated property. As slaves whose labor was commandeered by their would-be liberators. Complicated, isn't it? This planned park would do more than counterbalance the Confederate statues or street names elsewhere in town; it would rewrite and redraw in more than black and white what Toni Morrison called "rememory" – the memory of a memory, which is another way of saying *identity*.

You know that this state was divided from east to west on whether to join the Confederacy. You know that more battles of the Civil War were fought in Tennessee than in any other state. You know that the battle of Nashville essentially ended the war in this state and that after the war Tennessee became the first Southern state to ratify the 14th Amendment and the first to rejoin the Union. You know that Andrew Johnson was a senator from this state and, as a War Democrat, became military governor here and then Lincoln's vice president. You know that *President* Johnson, in a rush to reunion with the South, undermined Reconstruction and betrayed the freedmen and vetoed the Civil Rights Act of 1866 and was overridden and then impeached – 150 years ago this very week, in fact – by a Republican Congress frustrated that Lincoln's former deputy would turn out to be such a friend of the unreconstructed Confederacy and a foe of black aspirations to citizenship. You know that in 1869 Tennessee rejected the Fifteenth Amendment, which gave ex-slaves the vote – and didn't ratify it until 1997. You know that Tennessee put the Nineteenth Amendment over the top in 1920, and that women in the United States got the vote because a young state legislator, Harry Burn from McMinn County, got a call from his mother telling him to change his vote.

You do know all this, right?

What do you do then with this knowledge, with all this rememory? This state is soaked in blood and self-justification. Some of you can draw family trees right through that blood. Others of you are immigrants here, whether from abroad or from, say, San Francisco. What do you choose to remember? What song do you mix out of these cacophonous samples? Some in the White House want to weaponize nostalgia in the service of white supremacy. Some in white households want memory to be a swaddling blanket of racial innocence, so that they can continue to enjoy the privilege of not having to confront their privilege. But others, like your white male mayor, want Nashville and Tennessee and the South and the North to grow up. To face history and ourselves.

That starts with letting go of some things. Recently I read a moving essay by Sallie Tisdale about what caring for Alzheimer's patients has taught her. She's learned that when loved ones of the demented – that's the word she uses – when they get angry or ignoring what's truly happening. That mother may be losing her memory and her patterns of behavior may be shifting but she is not losing her capacity for feeling or

awareness or consciousness. She is simply becoming something else, *which was always happening anyway*. The child drew security and identity from the illusion that the parent was unchanging. The end of that illusion makes the child sad. But the mother isn't necessarily sad. She just is. She is experiencing life *now*. And if the child could let go of her fixed story of what the parent was and must forever be – the way, for instance, a caregiver is able to – then perhaps that child can find some grace in watching how this transformed, newborn adult moves and learns and communicates.

As it is with a family, so it is with a polity. Tisdale writes: "When we say she's not my mother anymore, we mean she is not the mother she used to be, the mother we remember." Before us is ambiguity and flux. Do we see only catastrophe or can we imagine creation? We choose how to see. That is the case with an aging elder. It is true of a region like Middle Tennessee that either will or will not bring itself to break out of the patterns of a segregated, stratified past. It is true for a diversifying nation that must decide whether making itself great again means welcoming or punishing immigrants, including or excluding people of color, seeing or not seeing religious minorities, LGBTQ people, the poor and disabled and the disfavored. Who is the *we* in *we the people*?

This is why what Mayor Briley is doing to create this new park is more than a mere gesture of compensatory justice. It is an invitation to every citizen of Nashville to let go of a zero-sum way of thinking – the mindset that says that if black lives matter then white lives must not; that the only alternative to domination must be subjugation. It is a reminder that a bigger story of us is possible, one that contains the past in all its complexity and faces the future in all *its* complexity and simplifies that complexity with the throughline that is neither domination nor subjugation but is *equality of dignity*.

Can we deal with that? To grow up civically means being candid about our own deep emotional drives. Why do we act as we do? What are we afraid of? Are we trying to hide pain? To avoid responsibility? To hoard power and authority? To shirk shame? To sabotage ourselves or others? The ardent defenders of the statues of Sam Davis or Nathan Bedford Forrest in Nashville are often guilty of acting out like adolescents. But so sometimes are their critics. In politics today, we don't really see or fight each other. Whether trolling on Facebook or shouting across a square at the capitol, it's more like we have avatars in a video game who are engaged in ritual combat, where the weapons are narratives and the goal is annihilation, while we, the actual humans playing this game at a virtual remove, don't know our own minds and can't plumb our own hearts.

Which brings me to my second theme this morning: naming our motives.

Motives

The three Reconstruction Amendments to the Constitution of the United States form a pretty good case study of clouded and manipulated motivations. The standard history

textbook tells a simple story about the intentions behind each. The Thirteenth Amendment was meant to end slavery. The Fourteenth Amendment was meant to give ex-slaves citizenship. The Fifteenth Amendment was to give ex-slaves the franchise.

Those readings are true, as far as they go. But they don't go far enough.

The Thirteenth Amendment, as the filmmaker Ava DuVernay points out in her documentary *13th*, banned involuntary servitude (Yay!) “except as a punishment for crime” (What?) and through that clause came the Black Codes and the Jim Crow laws and the perfectly legal systems for prosecuting the formerly enslaved on trumped-up charges like “vagrancy” and sending them back into systems of industrial bondage that gave rise to the modern-day complex of mass incarceration. Out of that clause – “except as a punishment for crime” – bloomed the malevolent motivations of white supremacists to remain supreme and to enact slavery by another name.

Well, how about the Fourteenth Amendment? It says that “all persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States.” Correct. But not just them. A generation after the Civil War, a laborer named Wong Kim Ark, born in San Francisco to Chinese immigrant parents, went to China to visit relatives and when he tried to come back the San Francisco the authorities barred him because the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 was in effect. But Wong said, “I’m not a foreigner. I’m an American. I was born here and the Fourteenth Amendment makes me a citizen.” And the Supreme Court reluctantly had to agree. The plain language of the amendment was clear: birthright citizenship for all.

Except. Except for that phrase “subject to the jurisdiction thereof.” At the time, the Reconstruction Republicans who drafted that language explained that this phrase was meant to exclude from birthright citizenship Native Americans and foreign diplomats or visitors, all of whom had allegiances to other sovereign jurisdictions. But today, nativist anti-immigrant activists, haunted by the specter of so-called “anchor babies” and “chain migration,” want to repeal birthright citizenship for the children of undocumented immigrants. They argue that immigrants who came here illegally, no matter how long they have lived and worked here and raised families here, remain subject to the jurisdiction of, say, Mexico, and that their children born here cannot count as citizens. They argue, in short, that the sin and stigma of the father must be passed on to the son.

Today that is a minority view in the legal community. But there is a right-wing legal and political machine dedicated to making it mainstream. And the question for everyday Americans now is not so much how to decode legislative history and constitutional law but rather whether we like the basic motives behind this push. Is the motive to define American narrowly around a white core – a motive of fear and scarcity and chauvinism – is that motive itself un-American?

A cynic might say, no, it's as American as motherhood and apple pie. There were many mothers who thought that when the Fifteenth Amendment was being debated. Here too is a case of hidden meanings and lawyerly silences. The right to vote "shall not be denied or abridged ... on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude." Sounds like an unimpeachably good thing. We hear it as a guarantee to ex-slaves that they'll have the right to vote. But it's not. Nowhere in the Constitution is there any affirmative right to vote. The Fifteenth Amendment says the right to vote can't be denied because of race. But it *can* be denied for plenty of other reasons. It *can* be denied, for instance, because of failure to pass a literacy test or to make the poll tax payments that became the preferred legal method of Southern states to keep blacks out of the ballot box. And guess what else: it could be denied on the basis of sex.

There was a great debate about this in 1869. The wording of the Fifteenth was crafted intentionally to allow states to keep women from voting. Suffragists pushed Congress to add, after "on account of race or color," the words "or sex." They failed. They were laughed out of the chamber. Which is why some of them resented and even resisted the extension of the franchise to blacks. And that's why suffrage activists had to spend *fifty* more years organizing and advocating until they could push through their own amendment, the Nineteenth, in 1920.

The most remarkable thing about U.S. citizenship is that it has never been defined. The Constitution uses the word "citizen" but never explains it. The Fourteenth Amendment created a new status called "citizens of the United States" – superior to citizenship of a state – and made it a birthright with "privileges and immunities." But it did not spell out what that meant. And even these vague protections were undermined right away by the Gilded Age Supreme Court and a Congress weary of Reconstruction. From that time onward, citizenship has been defined mainly in the negative. By exclusion. By saying, *This person cannot claim citizenship. This person "has no rights a white man is bound to respect,"* to use the infamous words of the *Dred Scott* decision.

In short, to be a citizen of the United States has mainly meant to be not *not* a citizen. It's a club whose sole apparent purpose is to deny certain people membership. It's a club in another sense as well – a cudgel to keep certain people down.

Consider the current controversy about the Census. As you may have heard, the Trump Administration announced this week that for the first time in seventy years, the U.S. Census is going to ask people whether they are citizens. Now, many of you might think, what's wrong with that? Seems reasonable.

What's wrong is the motive behind the question. That motive is intimidation. Intimidate immigrants, documented or not, and make them hide from the census. Which means there will be an undercount of Hispanics and Asians and Muslims. Which means Congressional apportionment and state legislative redistricting can proceed as if America were whiter and older and more Republican than it is or may ever be again.

This president and his enablers among the GOP leadership look at the changing demographics of our nation, look at the rising progressivism of young people, and figure, *If you can't beat 'em and you don't want to join 'em, then don't count 'em.*

Do I have proof of this motive? Not in a smoking gun statement from the Commerce Secretary, who's responsible for managing the Census. But I have it in the way he overruled experts from both parties who warn that asking the citizenship question will distort the results. I have it in the record of the words and deeds of his boss, the president. I have it in the sympathy that Donald Trump expresses for those who seek a blood-and-soil American identity based on whiteness and Christianity and origins on our territory. I have it in the bad faith way he makes promises.

Some of my friends on the right say I'm overstating the danger. But I invite them to consider how they'd respond if the Census were suddenly to ask about gun ownership. Then they will sympathize rather quickly with the fear that the machinery of state might be deployed to intimidate and stigmatize and to create a registry of who and what can be rounded up and confiscated on a moment's notice.

Motive matters. And it is all pretty simple. If your motive is to exclude, to hoard, to try to block the future from happening, then you should lose. American history is a record of groups of people fighting that exclusion, challenging that hoarding, opening the gates to the future. American history is a record of small groups of people – rooms less full than this one – who keep remaking this country over and over, and who reveal to us all that the perpetual remaking is the greatest statement of fidelity to our creed and our national purpose, which is not to be like Russia, white and stagnant and oligarchic, or like China, monoethnic and authoritarian and centralized, but to be more like America, hybrid and dynamic and democratic and free to be remade.

You know how we do that? We show up. We join clubs. We start clubs. We build citizen muscle. We learn how to read and write power, starting in our local communities. We learn how to practice civic character in gatherings like this. We register. We register others. We vote. Because there is no such thing as not voting. Not voting *is* voting to hand your power to someone who despises and will use it against you. We ask disarming questions. We listen. We make friends. We make trouble, what John Lewis calls *good* trouble. We make this country live up to its promises by starting with ourselves. We *realize* this country by making it more possible for more people more of the time to participate in and contribute to the simple miracle of self-government.

That's my motive. What's yours? Do you live to exclude or include, to hoard or to circulate, to leech or to feed? Be honest. Do you believe it's every man for himself – or do you believe we're all better off when we're all better off? Careful: both beliefs are self-fulfilling. You behave like you believe. Then society becomes how you behave. It's only by looking with clear eyes at what really drives our choices – not what we say, what

we will tell a pollster or a neighbor – that we open the possibility of truth, reconciliation, and civic renewal. And that’s my third theme today: how to make ourselves anew.

Makeovers

So, the other day my wife and I watched an episode of *Queer Eye* on Netflix. It’s a revival of the series from the early 2000’s in which a Fab Five of stereotypically stylish gay men perform an extreme makeover on a hetero man who needs serious help with his wardrobe, home furnishings, diet, and grooming. Jena was watching it and as I walked through the TV room I scoffed at her and the whole idea and then I sat down and then I stayed and forty minutes later we were both wiping tears off our face.

This episode featured Tom, a 57 year-old thrice-divorced man from Dallas, Georgia, a guy with a ZZ Top beard, a uniform of baseball cap and red shirt and jean shorts, and a diet of beef burritos and what he called “redneck margaritas.” His warning at the start was “You can’t fix ugly.” But gradually, and cheerfully, Tom changed. He traded the cap for a knit hat, the jean shorts for khakis, the stained recliner for a his-and-hers pair of chairs, ZZ Top for Ulysses S. Grant. In the end, he wooed a woman named Abby – his most recent ex-wife, whom he said he had never stopped loving – and she responded.

I cried, not so much at Tom’s physical transformation, which was great, but at his open-hearted willingness to be transformed. To make friends. His readiness to being guided by his Fab Five counselors, and his readiness – when they asked without judgment – to acknowledge his pain and fear and loneliness and shame, all of which had led him to be stuck for twelve years in a loop of numbed avoidance and beef burritos. I realized, that’s most of America. That’s most of us here today. In a lonely habit of numbed avoidance.

That episode of that silly show moved me so deeply because it showed me a man willing to forgive himself. It’s like your Nashville neighbor Ann Patchett says: there’s a chasm between the life we imagine on the big screen of our limbic system and the life that unfolds in our measurable little habits. That applies to the nation as it does to the person. Forgive the gap. Then we might have a shot at closing it.

But remember: extreme makeovers are temporary made-for-TV spectacles. The slog, the shift by degrees, is what most of life is. Tom’s time on *Queer Eye* reminded me that a citizenship based on feeling and admitting grief is better than one based on avoiding and stifling it. A citizenship based on reckoning with the ugly, whether it’s fixable or not, is what we are called to practice now. And our ancestors can show us how.

In 1885, a bright young man from Great Barrington, Massachusetts came down to Nashville to study at Fisk University. He would graduate in three years and go on from there to Harvard for graduate school and to Germany, where he studied further, and

then to Atlanta, where he taught and helped found the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. His name was William Edward Burghardt Du Bois.

The years that W.E.B. Du Bois spent in Tennessee changed his life. His time at Fisk planted in his mind the idea of the “talented tenth” – that a black elite had a responsibility to serve all black Americans. His time here also gave a sheltered Northern boy his first exposure to Jim Crow in the raw and to the daily degradations most blacks in the South had to bear. He left feeling more responsible for the deliverance of this nation.

Du Bois would come to renown as a great social scientist, pioneering methods of studying the African American experience that are still influential today. But his time in Tennessee shaped him on the spirit level. It was out of this experience – at Fisk, and in the small towns outside Nashville where he taught unlettered unshod black kids how to read and write – that he wrote his classic work *The Souls of Black Folk*. What made that book a classic is that he told a story of resilience and persistence and claiming and unacknowledged authorship of the country – and he told that tale using a prose that was like poetry, using music instead of math.

This was a work of American civic religion. A work that promises no makeovers, only the slog. And maybe a reason or two to keep slogging.

At the head of every chapter Du Bois printed a few bars of the “sorrow songs,” spirituals and other ancient songs that black Americans had used as a salve for their suffering and a source of hope for the possibility of rebirth and liberation. But in the text of every chapter he made clear just how hard liberation would be – how liberation from old ways and old identities had failed at the institutional level after the Civil War because it had failed at the imaginative level. The fatigue that set in, the way that the Freedmen’s Bureau lost its will and its way as Reconstruction crumbled, the way the Confederacy struck back, was not a failure of bureaucracy. It was a failure of empathy.

As the century closed, white Americans North and South just wanted to get rich. New European immigrants arrived, and figured out that the way to be called white instead of foreign was to put down blacks. None of them wanted to imagine the formerly enslaved as people like them. And through it all, black women and men kept living and dying and remaking Nashville and Davidson County and Tennessee and the United States.

“Through all the sorrow of the sorrow songs,” writes Du Bois, “there breathes a hope – a faith in the ultimate justice of things. The minor cadences of despair change often to triumph and calm confidence. Sometimes it is faith in life, sometimes a faith in death, sometimes assurance of boundless justice in some fair world beyond. But whichever it is, the meaning is always clear: that sometime, somewhere, men will judge men by their souls and not by their skins. Is such a hope justified? Do the sorrow songs sing true?”

We haven't yet answered those questions. Trumpian nationalists want an America that is whiter and more Anglo and less foreign. And in the near term they may be able to deport Salvadorans and Liberians and Syrians and Iranians and to demonize black and Mexican and Chinese people. But sooner or later, as the sorrow songs teach us, they will not be able to stem the tide of diversity and impurity that is America and that has been America for "thrice a hundred years," as Du Bois put it.

There is no such thing as extreme makeover, though we pretend for the sake of narrative that there is. Trump's America is still, to a large extent, Obama's America. Roseanne 2018 is deeply like Roseanne 1998. When the *Queer Eye* cameras left, some of Tom's bad habits surely returned. Yet his original willingness to grow and be vulnerable – I bet that remains. Deep structure, like it or not, endures. A structural tilt toward racism. A structural bent for justice. All that was good about yesterday has not been extinguished and all that is bad about today didn't just arrive.

Become America

Let me close with a note about music. On Thursday night, my wife and I went to hear the Seattle Symphony perform the world premiere of a piece by John Luther Adams called *Become Desert*. It was the companion to a piece he'd composed in 2014 called *Become Ocean*, which won the Pulitzer Prize. Neither piece has traditional musical narrative or structure; they are more like sound baths of rolling thunder and dew drops with whorls of water and fauna unfolding. They are like nature itself: immersive, random, patterned and chaotic. I felt this music in my body, the way I felt democracy in my body when I was marching with half a hundred thousand others for our lives last Saturday. If Walt Whitman could score symphonies about the self-regenerating multitudes of American life, it might sound like these compositions.

I tell you about *Become Ocean* and *Become Desert* because it is Easter tomorrow. It is Passover now. It is four days before Dr. King dies again. Listen. Open your hearts, your ears, your eyes. Question your memories, your motives, your impulse to make yourself over. The souls of American folk will be saved not by church or synagogue or mosque alone. They will be saved also by simple civic habits of forbearance and friendship and openness and love. It's time to become humble. To become responsible. To become faithful to our creed. To become curious about what else, what other music, we might make together.

It is time – it is long past time – to become America.

Readings to Precede the Sermon • March 31, 2018

Hank Williams

“I’m So Lonesome I Could Cry”

Written in 1949

Hear that lonesome whippoorwill
He sounds too blue to fly
That means he's lost the will to live
I'm so lonesome I could cry
Did you ever see a night so slow
As time goes draggin' by
The moon just went behind the clouds
To hide its face and cry
The silence of a falling star
Lights up a purple sky
And as I wonder where you are
I'm so lonesome I could cry
I'm so lonesome I could cry
I'm so lonesome I could cry

Excerpts from the Reconstruction Amendments to the United States Constitution

Thirteenth Amendment

Ratified on December 18, 1865

Section 1. Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.

Fourteenth Amendment

Ratified on July 28, 1868

Section 1. 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....

Fifteenth Amendment

Ratified on March 30, 1870

Section 1. The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude.

W.E.B. Du Bois
Excerpt from *The Souls of Black Folk*
Published 1903

Your country? How came it yours? Before the Pilgrims landed we were here. Here we have brought our three gifts and mingled them with yours: a gift of story and song – soft, stirring melody in an ill-harmonized and unmelodious land; the gift of sweat and brawn to beat back the wilderness, conquer the soil, and lay the foundations of this vast economic empire two hundred years earlier than your weak hands could have done it; the third, a gift of the Spirit.... Actively we have woven ourselves with the very warp and woof of this nation,— we fought their battles, shared their sorrow, mingled our blood with theirs, and generation after generation have pleaded with a headstrong, careless people to despise not Justice, Mercy, and Truth, lest the nation be smitten with a curse. Our song, our toil, our cheer, and warning have been given to this nation in blood-brotherhood. Are not these gifts worth the giving? Is not this work and striving? Would America have been America without her Negro people?

Ann Patchett
Excerpt from *This is the Story of a Happy Marriage*
Published 2013

Forgiveness. The ability to forgive oneself. Stop here for a few breaths and think about this because it is the key to making art, and very possibly the key to finding any semblance of happiness in life. Every time I have set out to translate the book (or story, or hopelessly long essay) that exists in such brilliant detail on the big screen of my limbic system onto a piece of paper (which, let's face it, was once a towering tree crowned with leaves and a home to birds), I grieve for my own lack of talent and intelligence. Every. Single. Time. Were I smarter, more gifted, I could pin down a closer facsimile of the wonders I see. I believe, more than anything, that this grief of constantly having to face down our own inadequacies is what keeps people from being writers. Forgiveness, therefore, is key. I can't write the book I want to write, but I can and will write the book I am capable of writing. Again and again throughout the course of my life I will forgive myself.