



“Beyond Liberation”
Sermon by Eric Liu • Civic Saturday
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This morning we heard two lengthy readings from Frederick Douglass. I selected those readings for three reasons. First, I just spent the eight weeks since we last met making my way through the epic new Douglass biography by David Blight – a truly great and complex book about a truly great and complex man. So, there’s no way I am not going to talk about Frederick Douglass now and get more of you to share the thrill of this work – and to share the carpal-tunnel ache of holding an 800-pager for weeks on end!

The second reason I chose these excerpts is of course that we are now in the second day of Black History Month – or, as I like to think of it, *American* History Month. It is impossible to know the breadth and depth of the history of our nation without knowing the ways that enslaved Africans and generations of their descendants not only built the nation and the nation’s wealth, not only put the pretty words of our Constitution to the test, not only redeemed our American creed by their deeds, but in so doing created the possibility of liberation for people of *every* color and caste.

Now I said the “possibility” of liberation. And here is the third reason why we heard the words of Douglass this morning. Both those excerpts from great Douglass speeches were, in a sense, split in half. It’s why we divvied the task of reading each text to two voices. Each excerpt, like Douglass himself, was of two minds about liberation.

He was a fiercely uncompromising abolitionist who saw that Lincoln started out as the white man’s president and who had the guts to say so at a memorial ceremony attended by all the white men leading the nation. Talk about speaking truth to power. At the same time, he was a savvy political player who came to appreciate why a president had to compromise and answer to the whole nation and not only to the abolitionist or the slave.

Douglass was at once a believer in self-reliant rugged individualism – a forerunner to Booker T. Washington and Clarence Thomas – *and* at the same time a believer in the mutual collective obligation of the entire nation to make things right for the freed men and women of the South.

Purist and pragmatist, outsider and insider, seemingly self-made yet acutely aware that no one is ever truly self-made: in today's readings Douglass revealed himself to be as spiritually divided and morally ambivalent as any American ever was, living or dead.

And he reveals to us the immense difficulty of true liberation – from the patterns of the past, from the certainties of political ideology and theological principle, from the pulsing flesh-and-blood immediacy of one's own eye – and *I*.

Liberation is the theme I want to explore this morning. But I want to explore it in the fullness of an arc that runs from slavery to liberation to freedom, in which liberation is merely the turning point. The choice point. That arc is the story of Frederick Douglass. It is the birthright and the burden of every American, living or dead. I begin with slavery.

Slavery

To read one of Frederick Douglass's autobiographies is to be confronted on a personal scale with the terror of enslavement and the brutality of the enslaver. But to read Blight's book, which sets the life of Douglass in the context of his times, is to be reminded that slavery was called "the peculiar institution" because it was an *institution*. It was a system, a depersonalized society-wide web of laws, rules, and daily social norms, fed by deep currents of money and backed by the organized violence of the state.

The perpetrators of that institution were not only the tyrannical enslavers on their lush plantations. The conspiracy was deeper and wider than that. Every banker and every worker in every cotton mill in the North, every New England college endowed by blood money, every Christian congregation across the territory that made allowances for accommodation with the Slave Power: all were parts if not pillars of the peculiar institution. Every unenslaved person who benefited from coerced uncompensated labor was complicit. Which meant every unenslaved person was complicit.

Consider the Fugitive Slave Law. Its enactment as part of the Compromise of 1850, and the civil disobedience that followed, accelerated the arrival of civil war. But before the Fugitive Slave Law was a law it was clause in the Constitution – Article IV, Section 2, Clause 3. Look it up. It's still there: "No person held to service or labour in one state, under the laws thereof, escaping into another, shall, in consequence of any law or regulation therein, be discharged from such service or labor, but shall be delivered up on claim of the party to whom such service or labour may be due."

That Clause, each word of which was contested at the Constitutional Convention to avoid the word "slavery" and to avoid the appearance that the federal Constitution *explicitly* sanctioned slavery, was not self-executing. It required and thus invited congressional legislation to put it into effect. In other words, it was a calamity waiting to

happen. As the playwright Anton Chekov said, "One must never place a loaded rifle on the stage if it isn't going to go off. It's wrong to make promises you don't mean to keep."

The Fugitive Slave Clause sat there like a loaded rifle for 63 years until Congress in 1850 enacted it into law. And as in one of Chekov's dramas, that inciting incident released a cascade of tragic consequence. John Brown's raid, bloodshed on the floor of Congress, the *Dred Scott* decision, the normalization of secession and disunion talk.

Looking back, as if at the end of a Chekov play or, for that matter, the Old Testament, we feel a sense of inevitability about the self-destruction of the institution of slavery and the ultimate arrival of emancipation. But one of the gifts of reading about those years from the vantage point of Douglass, the fugitive slave who became the most famous abolitionist on earth, is remembering that when you're in the middle of events, when you're in the thick of the fight, when a million unseen choices and acts are converging and colliding in ways you cannot predict, when a million loaded and unloaded rifles on stages everywhere, nothing at all is inevitable.

Today you and I are in the middle of events, in the thick of many fights, amidst such a roiling churn of choice and consequence. So, I ask you: what institution today is as all-surrounding and as corrosively enmeshed in everyone's lives as slavery was then? What institution today dominates us so entirely that we have a hard time imagine extricating ourselves from complicity in its destructive effects? What institution today dominates us to the point where we tolerate evil on a daily basis?

One answer that's become increasingly popular is "neoliberal carbon-spewing inequality-turbocharging casino-style consumer capitalism." I'm rather partial to that answer and my policy preferences show it. But another answer out there is "neo-Marxist liberty-stifling enterprise-choking Millennial-chic state socialism." And I refuse to automatically demonize everyone who offers this answer.

What Frederick Hayek called "the road to serfdom" – government intervention into the workings of the economy – Franklin Roosevelt called the path to the four freedoms. What citizen Ronald Reagan in his famous 1964 speech "A Time for Choosing" called "the ant heap of totalitarianism" President Lyndon Johnson that same year called the Great Society. What capitalist Howard Schultz deems "un-American" about socialist Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's idea for a 70 percent top marginal tax rate President Dwight Eisenhower once called "responsible economics, not Communism."

What does it mean when what one person calls freedom another calls slavery? For starters, it might mean that we are all becoming too fundamentalist in our thought. The fortunes of billionaires, like the proposals for single-payer health care, are today more than ever political and moral Rorschach tests. How you see these inkblots assigns you to one of two tribes, within which certitude rather than doubt is the coin of the realm.

It also means that we should more searchingly ask ourselves what liberty is and is for, so that we don't too casually label the thing we don't like "slavery" or "serfdom." Douglass, on his trips to England, Scotland and Ireland to raise funds for the abolitionist cause, would politely but firmly correct his Irish hosts who said that their treatment under British rule was a form of slavery. No, he said, only slavery – the institution he was born into and had escaped from – is slavery. Don't get sloppy with your concepts.

Douglass knew not only the difference between real slavery and metaphorical slavery; he knew also the difference between liberation and freedom. And that is what I want to turn to next: liberation.

Liberation

There's a reason why the effective date of the Emancipation Proclamation, January 1, 1863, was and still is called Jubilee Day. The formal end of enslavement is a thing to be celebrated and to be commemorated with odes to joy.

But remember this: liberation isn't freedom. It is only the removal of oppression. Think about other great moments of liberation in living memory. The liberation of France and Germany from Nazi control was not enough to make Western Europe free; it took the Marshall Plan and NATO to do that. The fall of the Berlin Wall liberated Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union to become ... what, exactly? The toppling of Saddam Hussein liberated Iraqis from his dictatorship but resulted in something far short of freedom.

Don't get me wrong: humanity is immeasurably better off without the tyranny of the Third Reich, the USSR, and the Baathist regime. My point is only this: The opposite of tyranny is not freedom. The opposite of tyranny is the void. A void created by the absence of controls. Within that void, freedom – true freedom – is indeed one possible eventual outcome. But it is far from the most likely or the easiest to achieve.

What fills the void first and most readily?

Loneliness and isolation, consumerism, addictive entertainments, addictive drugs. Also: nativist nationalism and racist scapegoating. Also: religious and partisan fanaticism. Also: counter-revolution by the organized forces of tyranny. Also: a willingness among some of the liberated to be guided anew by a strong hand.

Consider the course of the French Revolution from liberation to a renaissance of tyranny. Consider the similar story of the Arab Spring in Egypt and Libya. Consider how much happier most Russians have been under Putin's efficient authoritarianism than they were under Yeltsin's chaotic proto-democracy.

Those Russians were liberated but never free.

I can relate. We Americans today are also liberated but not quite free. We have fewer restraints upon us than Americans of prior centuries did. We may be the most liberated unrestrained society in human history. Yet still you and I seem to flail in the void, pulled magnetically between poles of hyper-individualism and obedient conformity.

The Notre Dame political philosopher Patrick Deneen wrote a powerful, sharp-edged book about this last year called *Why Liberalism Failed*. Though he is politically and culturally conservative, the liberalism he refers to in his title is not what we think of as left-liberalism or progressivism. He means the philosophy of classical liberalism, a philosophy of free markets and free individuals that was born in rebellion against kings and churches and aristocratic estates and fixed classes.

In Deneen's telling, this philosophy of classical liberalism is admirable to the extent it throws off tyranny and invites democracy. But it contains within it the seeds of its own destruction. It first teaches people to shed their ties of culture and affinity and place and enter the wide-open marketplace as free agents. It then convinces them that they can thrive in this market and in the world as autonomous individuals, detached from commitments to others. When they fail to thrive, and when inequality becomes too severe, this insatiable ideology of liberalism then opens the door to an ever-growing government and ever more dominating corporations that promise them security and stability. And eventually those citizens, in trading their liberty for security, lose both.

This narrative of liberation and its self-betrayal can't easily be put in a right-left grid. Big government and concentrated globalized corporate power are not enemies, in this story. They are co-dependents. Deneen – and a growing number of people on the right – are starting to challenge the free-markets/free-trade orthodoxy of modern conservatism. He seems as suspicious of rent-seeking monopolists on Wall Street and in Silicon Valley as Elizabeth Warren or Kshama Sawant.

And his preferred solution – a return to local control, to a sense of place and its traditions, to economic and cultural activity on a human scale – can sound very Seattle. But it can also lead to outcomes not very Seattle. For instance, Deneen doesn't want government to punish a baker for refusing on religious principle to sell a cake to a gay couple. He leaves unaddressed the question of how he would have responded to Jim Crow had he been a citizen of the South during the Civil Rights movement. Jim Crow, after all, was a local culture of tradition and "heritage" par excellence.

Regardless, Deneen is right that what's fashionably called neoliberalism today – a blind faith in markets and individualism – eats away at the foundations of family, identity, citizenship, faith, and the dignity of work. Freedom is choosing. But that does not mean that choice is freedom. True freedom sometimes means that we choose to have fewer choices; to restrain ourselves with bonds of obligation.

When I said earlier that liberation is the pivot in our journey, the choice point, what I meant, then, was that the removal of tyranny creates only an opportunity for us to choose: whether to live like a free citizen capable of discernment or to fall into the unfreedom that results both when government is too strong *and* when it is too weak.

This, the true meaning of freedom, is the last topic I want to explore with you.

Freedom

Here's what I believe: freedom is responsibility. Let me repeat that, in big letters: **FREEDOM IS RESPONSIBILITY**. It is more than the removal of restraints. It is more than procedural rights to be let alone. More than getting to call yourself whatever label you want. True freedom is freely chosen encumbrance and duty to others.

I know this is not how most Americans think of freedom.

To explain why I see things this way, let me tell you about a photograph I have on my desk at my home office. It's an old 3 x 5 picture of my father mowing the lawn on the slope of our wide front yard. In the background is the street we lived on, Old English Way, and the colonial house and sloped yard across the street. The year is 1990.

Why do I keep this photo? For one thing, it is a picture of the last summer I was with my dad. I had just graduated from college. I was home for two months before I'd be starting work in Washington, DC. A year later, he would be dead, felled suddenly and unexpectedly by an illness that had gradually weakened him. On some level I understood the unspoken fragility of things, which is perhaps why I snapped a photo of such a mundane suburban scene.

But I keep that picture also to remind me about all that I have inherited as an American born in the United States in 1968. In that photo, my dad is wearing a long-sleeved shirt even though it's summer. That's because he wanted to hide the fistula on his arm that was necessary for the home dialysis necessary to keep him alive. He and we kept it a secret from his colleagues at IBM and from most of our friends and neighbors. But thanks to that home dialysis he lived for fourteen years after his end-stage kidney disease was diagnosed – far longer than doctors at that time predicted was possible.

That he got so many years is because of what is now sometimes mocked as “free health care.” Medicare. That, and his work at IBM, which was made possible by what is now sometimes derisively called “free college” – the Universities of Illinois and Michigan, where he earned a bachelor's and a master's degree for just hundreds of dollars per year. Later, when my mother decided she wanted to go back to work, she

also took advantage of so-called “free college” by taking computer science courses at the local state university branch in New Paltz. Soon she was an IBMer too.

Let me draw your attention to some other parts of that photo. Our street, Old English Way, was part of a new suburban development in Wappingers Falls, New York planned and carved out of woods and meadows by a Swedish immigrant builder named Gus Josefson and financed in part by federal loans and home mortgage interest deductions. Big government. In turn, the equity that accumulated in our Colonial house on 11 Old English Way helped send me to a private college.

Across the street, at 16 Old English Way, was the Garrity family. Five kids, including my first friend in the neighborhood, John, who taught me how to play baseball, how to ride a bicycle with gears, how to build a fort in the woods, how to fight back against a bully. John’s dad Jack was older than my dad but like my dad and like most dads in Merrywood he was an IBMer. Jack had a quiet voice and a mild demeanor. His flattop was the only hint that he had fought in the Second World War. That, and his hobby of making models of warplanes like the Flying Fortress bomber in which he had been a tail gunner. Mr. Garrity taught me how to make model planes and clipper ships with skill and attention to detail. He showed me how to store my paints and my glues in a well-ordered tackle box. And he rarely talked about the terrors he had faced in that tail-gunner’s bubble. But here was this suburban father who had raised a big family in Merrywood because he had survived that war and been a beneficiary of the GI Bill.

I’m not trying to tell a tale about the wonders of government alone. It wasn’t just government that made our neighborhood thrive and made our lives, for a stretch of years, feel so secure. It was the vitality of IBM in the 1970s and 80s. It was how hard we all worked. It was entrepreneurs like Mr. Josefson. It was the web of relationships on our street: just as John looked out for me, Jack looked out for my dad. He knew my dad’s secret. He never spoke of it. But when my dad was sick enough to be hospitalized, Jack discreetly offered help. There was on our street a general civic ethic of showing up. Jack’s wife Carol Garrity, a knitter and a club-joiner, served for years on the town council and the sewer board. My parents were active in the Mid-Hudson Valley Chinese Association. All these things, not just government, mattered.

But I tell you about this photo because we should think about free college and free health care and subsidized housing not as wildly expensive pipe dreams but as the onetime foundations of middle-class stability and prosperity in our country. I wouldn’t call them a *right*; they are in fact a *responsibility*, a collective duty, to create opportunity for all. Upon such a foundation, financed by progressive taxation, each of us can then be free to choose, free to fail, free to thrive, free to reinvent ourselves (or not), free to deal with what fortune brings. From that base of what Frederick Douglass called basic “fair play,” society will get the windfall of everyone’s talent and potential.

My dad got to contribute to the best of his abilities, minus his own shortcomings and the vicissitudes of fate, and I have gotten to contribute on the same terms. I submit to you that the United States is better off – more free – for having made these investments in my father and my family.

Of course, nothing is cost-free. Each of these building blocks has a big price tag. And so does their absence.

Grown-ups can talk about this honestly. Many politicians can't. Politicians on one side often see only taxes and spending without admitting the compounding social benefits, and on the other side often name the benefits without admitting the scale of redistribution needed to achieve them. We've got to start showing our leaders how to talk honestly about both costs and benefits and about the trade-offs.

Do you like Medicare for All? Then take seriously the principled arguments against it. Don't just get on the bandwagon and assume your opponents are all selfish jerks. Do you hate the head tax that was passed and then repealed in Seattle? Then consider what you'd propose instead if you had the responsibility for ending homelessness on current revenue – because you do.

Freedom is responsibility. It's a huge hassle, I know. How blessed we are to be so hassled.

Conclusion

Let me conclude with Douglass. After the Civil War ended, there was a period when Frederick Douglass felt adrift, without purpose. A lifetime of struggle had led to this titanic victory but liberation was also disorienting, even strangely depressing. Sometimes he preached a Social Darwinist gospel of self-help and told former slaves that it was time for them to prove by hard work that they could be as fit as everyone else. Other times he argued that hard work could work only when accompanied by hard investments of help by the government – that to be “let alone” was not simply to be unchained but to be granted forty acres and a mule.

And when it became undeniable, a dozen years after the end of the war, that whites North and South were conspiring to re-subordinate black citizens under the banner of Reunion and Redemption, he found his voice and his purpose again. In this next chapter of his long life and career, Douglass remembered that to choose freedom is to commit to a course far more demanding than liberation. It is a course of citizenship.

Citizenship means embracing the tension in Douglass's voice between self-help and mutual aid. It means knowing that sometimes one is more appropriate than the other. It means recognizing that if someone has a worldview that operates in one register only,

whether it's all markets or all government, you should be dubious. Citizenship means that sometimes you must act like a single-minded advocate who can't be bothered with complexity but doesn't decide and sometimes you've got to act like a president or a mayor who can't escape complexity and must decide. Citizenship means knowing that sooner or later, every society will get educated in civics – so you might as well get the education early in a classroom rather than later in a crisis.

And finally: Citizenship means today, as it did when Frederick Douglass gave his 1876 memorial oration about Abraham Lincoln, that each of us must summon the moral courage to call out hate and hypocrisy and the moral humility to see both in ourselves.

The path from slavery to liberation to freedom is a path not of law and policy first but of culture and norms and habits of the heart, reinforced by infinite choices by countless people to take ownership of ourselves and our country. Walk that path. Let's walk it together. We are free to do so.

Readings to Precede the Sermon
February 2, 2019

Frederick Douglass
Excerpt from “Oration in Memory of Abraham Lincoln”
Washington, DC
Delivered April 14, 1876

It must be admitted, truth compels me to admit, even here in the presence of the monument we have erected to his memory, Abraham Lincoln was not, in the fullest sense of the word, either our man or our model. In his interests, in his associations, in his habits of thought, and in his prejudices, he was a white man.

He was preeminently the white man’s President, entirely devoted to the welfare of white men. He was ready and willing at any time during the first years of his administration to deny, postpone, and sacrifice the rights of humanity in the colored people to promote the welfare of the white people of this country. In all his education and feeling he was an American of the Americans. He came into the Presidential chair upon one principle alone, namely, opposition to the extension of slavery. His arguments in furtherance of this policy had their motive and mainspring in his patriotic devotion to the interests of his own race. To protect, defend, and perpetuate slavery in the states where it existed Abraham Lincoln was not less ready than any other President to draw the sword of the nation. He was ready to execute all the supposed guarantees of the United States Constitution in favor of the slave system anywhere inside the slave states. He was willing to pursue, recapture, and send back the fugitive slave to his master, and to suppress a slave rising for liberty, though his guilty master were already in arms against the Government. The race to which we belong were not the special objects of his consideration. Knowing this, I concede to you, my white fellow-citizens, a pre-eminence in this worship at once full and supreme. First, midst, and last, you and yours were the objects of his deepest affection and his most earnest solicitude. You are the children of Abraham Lincoln. We are at best only his step-children; children by adoption, children by forces of circumstances and necessity.

....

I have said that President Lincoln was a white man, and shared the prejudices common to his countrymen towards the colored race. Looking back to his times and to the condition of his country, we are compelled to admit that this unfriendly feeling on his part may be safely set down as one element of his wonderful success in organizing the loyal American people for the tremendous conflict before them, and bringing them safely through that conflict. His great mission was to accomplish two things: first, to save his country from dismemberment and ruin; and, second, to free his country from the great crime of slavery. To do one or the other, or both, he must have the earnest sympathy

and the powerful cooperation of his loyal fellow-countrymen. Without this primary and essential condition to success his efforts must have been vain and utterly fruitless. Had he put the abolition of slavery before the salvation of the Union, he would have inevitably driven from him a powerful class of the American people and rendered resistance to rebellion impossible. Viewed from the genuine abolition ground, Mr. Lincoln seemed tardy, cold, dull, and indifferent; but measuring him by the sentiment of his country, a sentiment he was bound as a statesman to consult, he was swift, zealous, radical, and determined.

Frederick Douglass
Excerpt from “The Self-Made Man”
Delivered in 1872, first written in 1859

The lesson taught at this point by human experience is simply this, that the man who will get up will be helped up; and the man who will not get up will be allowed to stay down. This rule may appear somewhat harsh, but in its general application and operation it is wise, just and beneficent. I know of no other rule which can be substituted for it without bringing social chaos. Personal independence is a virtue and it is the soul out of which comes the sturdiest manhood. But there can be no independence without a large share of self-dependence, and this virtue cannot be bestowed. It must be developed from within.

I have been asked “How will this theory affect the negro?” and “What shall be done in his case?” My general answer is “Give the negro fair play and let him alone. If he lives, well. If he dies, equally well. If he cannot stand up, let him call down.”

....

I have said “Give the negro fair play and let him alone.” I meant all that I said and a good deal more than some understand by fair play. It is not fair play to start the negro out in life, from nothing and with nothing, while others start with the advantage of a thousand years behind them. He should be measured, not by the heights others have obtained, but from the depths from which he has come. For any adjustment of the seals of comparison, fair play demands that to the barbarism from which the negro started shall be added two hundred years heavy with human bondage. Should the American people put a school house in every valley of the South and a church on every hill side and supply the one with teachers and the other with preachers, for a hundred years to come, they would not then have given fair play to the negro.