



**It's A Free Country**  
**Sermon by Eric Liu • Civic Saturday**  
**Fremont Abbey • Seattle, WA • October 20, 2018**

Thank you for being here this morning. It's hard to think of a more fitting location for a Civic Saturday than Fremont Abbey. Let me tell you a bit about where we've gathered. It was originally built 104 years ago as St. Paul's Lutheran church. As that congregation dwindled, it then was bought in 2005 by a young progressive Lutheran/Episcopal church called Church of the Apostles, which had been based across the street and wanted to make this space a sanctuary for community-building and creativity. In the years since, thanks to neighbor power and volunteer love, it became the Fremont Abbey Arts Center.

Our work at Citizen University is suffused with the same spirit – not of church religion but of American civic religion – of service, and love, and the creation of collective power in civic life among our neighbors, seeking together to redeem the American creed of liberty and justice for all. Redemption begins at home. It begins in the heart.

We began this morning with reflection and discussion about someone who has helped you. Thinking about that person for just one minute makes us realize just how isolating everyday life in America can be, how imprisoned we often are by all this liberty we enjoy – and how hungry we all are to help and to be helped. This morning I'd like to talk about three themes that are deeply connected: freedom, loneliness, and help.

## FREEDOM

Our first reading today comes from Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*. Side note: we could probably make every Civic Saturday for all time all about Tocqueville. In fact, we could do a year-long seminar or book club on this work, which is as bottomless a source of insight about American civic life and human nature as can be found.

But anyway – I want to emphasize one part of today's reading in particular: "Since in times of equality no man is obliged to put his powers at the disposal of another, and no one as any claim of right to substantial support from his fellow man, each is both independent and weak."

Independent and weak. Is there a better description for how America makes Americans feel? We are so free. Free to walk around Seattle each unaware of the other, as we look at our screens and listen to our private curated soundtracks and podcasts. Free to live in gated communities. Free to sleep on the streets and under bridges.

The offices of Citizen University are across the street from a homeless shelter and a block of tents. We look freedom in the face every day. I hear the words of “Me and Bobby McGee” on my way to and from work: *Freedom’s just another word for nothin’ left to lose*. When I was a kid and my dad used to play the album of Kris Kristofferson singing that song, I would think to myself that that was a pretty grim, even cynical view of freedom. Today I think grim, yes. Maybe not that cynical.

This condition of independence and weakness long precedes Tocqueville’s visit to the young United States in the 1830s. John Winthrop, the Puritan pilgrim most famous for his “city upon a hill” speech, gave another memorable speech in 1645 when he was governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. He was being impeached for abuse of power. In his defense, he spoke of the difference between a “liberty of corrupt nature” that allows men and beasts “to do what they list,” and a “moral liberty” that is harnessed to justice and goodness. To put it simply, doing whatever the hell you want is not freedom; it is enslavement. Notably, the speech got him acquitted.

From the outset, the Puritans who landed here feared that moral liberty – a liberty that is about being free not to do “as one lists” but is about being liberated from beastly appetites, a liberty of self-control and the ability to govern one’s self, a liberty of limits – would be hard to sustain in the face of the unlimited opportunity and choice that this continent promised. Their fears were borne out. The American politician today most likely to be impeached is the world’s most vivid embodiment of corrupt natural liberty, of unrestrained, unapologetic appetite. And he is president because he represents how in thrall – how enslaved – so many Americans are to unfettered, unapologetic appetite. How we cannot tell the difference between license and true liberty.

By the way, I always bristle when people talk about this being Trump’s America. Not just because of Trump. I quarreled when people called it Obama’s America. It gets the causal arrow backwards. This man is America’s Trump. Obama is America’s Obama. Other nations have people with all their qualities and traits and predispositions. But only in America could someone of such DNA rise to such power. We made each man. We – our collective appetites and aspirations, our “extremely contradictory instincts,” as Tocqueville put it – we gave rise to these men and many more like them.

Independent and weak. It can be hard to notice this condition because it’s simply the air we breathe and the water we drink here in the United States. But consider the arc of experience of an immigrant family. For the immigrant, who breathes this air and drinks this water for the first time, it is shocking in the first place to taste this unfettered liberty

to say, do, eat, wear whatever one lists; and then in the second place it is a little saddening to for the immigrant to watch their children absorb this liberty.

Recently I received as a gift a T-shirt that says CHILD OF IMMIGRANTS. It's made by a company in Chicago called Lawrence and Argyle that is devoting a part of profits to support immigrant and refugee causes. As I've been wearing it around the country, the varying reactions have been interesting. I wore it first on a crosstown walk with Jená here in Seattle, through Madrona, the Central District, and Capitol Hill, and I received quite a few smiles, nods, and positive comments. A few weeks later I was in Oklahoma City, walking through a newly hip but sparsely populated area near downtown. The people I encountered here didn't register any visible reaction, positive or negative.

Then I was in midtown Manhattan, where people were too busy and moving too fast to notice or engage. But several immigrant street vendors saw me and they smirked, as if to say, "How American. My generation does all the heavy lifting so that our children can grow up to wear cute self-congratulatory T-shirts." Finally, in the DC suburbs a couple of weeks ago, the people shopping at Whole Foods smiled warmly. But that's probably because I was with my mom, one of the immigrants to whom the T-shirt refers! And for the record, she likes it – though she also sympathizes with the smirking street vendors.

It would never occur to my mother or to my parents' generation of Chinese immigrants to wear a T-shirt that said IMMIGRANT. They know who they are and what they are. And even if they detest the politicians who feed anti-immigrant hatred, they do not put individual self-expression atop of their hierarchy of needs. To put it another way, immigrants are often freer than the native-born from the pressure to be a unique individual displaying unique identity and viewpoints and validity. They are often freer from the suffocating pressure to show that you are special, just like everyone else.

That is in large part because immigrants – of every caste, hue, and creed – are usually not alone. They are woven into a fabric of relationship and obligation. They are situated in a fabric of tradition, custom, norms, and habits that may seem and may even be limiting and yet, in the American context, can also be deeply liberating. We who were blessed to be born here are more likely to die alone. We who had the luck to be American from the start are more likely to suffer the rest of our lives from loneliness.

And that is the second theme I'd like to speak about today.

## LONELINESS

We are a lonely people. We are an atomized people. We are a people whose connective institutions have decayed and who are left exposed, each of us alone, to predatory marketers and predatory politicians and predatory lenders and predatory hatemongers. We are a nation of easy marks.

A recent UCLA study found that more than half of Americans are lonely, and that younger adults suffer more than any other group from feelings of isolation. The UCLA Loneliness Scale has scores from 20 to 80, with 43 and above indicating loneliness. The average American score is 43. For people in their early twenties, the score is 48, compared to a score of 39 for people in their seventies and older.

But here I go, doing that American thing of giving you a number with a credential attached to it to prove what your senses already tell you.

Tocqueville predicted that the combination of an ethos of individualism and a market economy would lead to both audacious innovation and deep spiritual emptiness. In short, he predicted social media. But I don't mean to blame social media alone or even primarily. It is, like the presidency, as much a mirror of our wants as a maker of them.

Earlier this week my colleagues from the Aspen Institute and I convened a group of practitioners and academics, including a team from Facebook, for a project we call Connections. The point of the project is to explore how technology, which has done so much to sort and sift us into pure, mutually antagonistic tribes and subtribes, might be used to build cohesion and common purpose out of heterogeneous groups. It is to ask whether tech can rehumanize civic life and not just dehumanize it.

But what became clear as the symposium unfolded was that tech was not the source of the problem. The underlying ailment of the body politic – what makes us prone to Russian bots and to home-grown agitators online and off – is the profound loneliness and isolation and social disconnection that defines American life, and the decline and disappearance of shared experiences that bridge people across identity markers.

Every public health crisis has its roots in this loneliness and social disconnection, whether it's the opioid crisis, the white male suicide spike, the rise in mass shootings, the surge of diabetes, the rise or homelessness. The former Surgeon General Vivek Murthy wrote an article last year stating that "Loneliness and weak social connections are associated with a reduction in lifespan similar to that caused by smoking 15 cigarettes a day and even greater than that associated with obesity."

And there is no way to trace the roots of the loneliness and isolation without coming to the all-American creed of rugged individualism.

U.S. Senator Ben Sasse recently gave a speech about this epidemic of loneliness and how it feeds hyperpartisanship and political polarization. He's from Fremont too – Fremont, Nebraska. It may be easy for Seattle progressives to dismiss Sasse, not just because he is a Nebraska Republican but also because he's one of that small group of GOP senators who are willing to criticize Trump but almost never to vote against or to block him. Still. Put aside whether Ben Sasse is a profile in courage or a poseur. He is

right: loneliness is killing us and our democracy. And he knows it acutely because he is an elected official, and elected officials receive the cries of all the lonely people.

Yesterday a man came to the front desk of our office building and demanded to meet with someone from our staff. My colleague Ben met with him. This man was earnest, intelligent, not unhinged but not coherent. He proceeded to unspool a tangled philosophy of all that ails America, and he concluded by saying that he needed us to hear him, to understand him, to help assure him that he saw the world's problems correctly. He left a letter that was more cogent than his front-lobby plea. And what struck me about this visitor was that he is us.

Each of us has a private philosophy about all that ails the world. Each of us imagines that we've got deep insights about the human condition. And each of us longs to be heard. Each of us longs to have our capacity to see and to make sense to be seen and made sense of. How lucky are we here today to know that we have that? Then this question: What we can do to ensure others have it as well?

How can we connect? We can start by remembering that this is a problem for which neither the market nor government may be the solution of first resort. Why? Because the market and the government combined to create the problem – the market, by hyperpersonalizing us into atomized niches; the government, by depersonalizing the relationships of mutual aid that used to hold neighborhoods and groups together. Both together have hollowed out the commons. This too was what Tocqueville foresaw. He saw that prideful rugged individualists would become isolated and afraid and in turn yearn for a stronger state to protect them, veering wildly between illusions of security.

To connect and reconnect, then, we have to fill in the abandoned third space that sits between the market and the state. That space looks like Fremont Abbey. It looks like Civic Saturday. It looks like every hobby club and social circle and community center that exists in this city – this city of so many newcomers who are not connected to each other or to the people who preceded them here. The third space is a space where we help each other, and that is the final theme I'll explore today.

## HELP

Jená's mother Sarah Ann Cane passed away this August. I would like to read to you a few lines of her obituary:

"I wanted two things in life – to raise children and keep a nice house." Sarah Ann Cane's legacy was that and much more. She raised five children and nurtured thirteen grandchildren, and five great-grandchildren. And to the end of her days, she created comfortable, cozy spaces full of art and beauty - places where people wanted to linger and converse. Sarah Ann passed away on August 26,

2018, one day after her eighty-fifth birthday, surrounded by her loving family at Ollie Steele Burden Manor in Baton Rouge. Born Sarah Ann Cann on August 25, 1933, in Ruston, LA, she was a graduate of Baton Rouge High and LSU. She was exceptionally resilient and courageous. She and her brother contracted polio in 1949. She emerged with a disabled leg and arm, he in an iron lung. As she raised her family and helped care for her brother, Sarah Ann overcame those obstacles. She rarely complained (and always wore lipstick). She made friends easily and was admired by all who met her.

Sarah Ann was all that and much more. Those of you who know Jená know she is her mother's daughter – especially if you've seen pictures of them. But tucked into that obituary is a mention of Sarah Ann's brother, Jená's Uncle Frederick, who emerged from *his* ordeal with polio paralyzed from the neck down. The rest of his story is that he lived forty-three years in that iron lung, most of them in the home where Jená and her siblings grew up.

He did not merely survive. He thrived. He ran small businesses from his home. He sold real estate while lying in that iron lung. He read voraciously, by having a contraption built in which a book would be strapped onto a plate above him and he would turn the pages with a special stick in his mouth, using an eraser on the end to gently lift a page out from the rubber bands on one side of the book and tuck its corner under the rubber bands on the other side. And in the last years of his life, he became a painter, holding a paint brush the same way, in his teeth. We have in our house an impressionist landscape he painted in ochre and bronze – a pond in late autumn, perhaps – that is arresting; and when you consider how it was made, it becomes simply staggering.

He was, in the most elemental physical way, profoundly unfree. But in ways that last and that perhaps matter most, he was truly free. His mind, his imagination, his ambition, his love of life. How did Jená's Uncle Frederick attain all that he did? By asking for help. By requiring it so unambiguously that like a magnet, he drew out the latent helping part of people around him: his sister, his nieces and nephews, his colleagues and friends. If most Americans are, by Tocqueville's reckoning, independent and weak, then Frederick Cann's life should remind us the power of being dependent and strong.

This is a twist on the usual message we get in good earnest civic gatherings like this one. The usual message is "Help someone." My message today is "Ask someone for help." That's the harder thing for us Americans to do, as prideful individualists who cannot face the realities of our weakness. I'm not good at it. It's not because I'm a child of immigrants – the Chinese community where I grew up in suburban New York was small but very mutualistic. It's more that I was the son of a father who had kidney disease and was on home dialysis the last fourteen years of his foreshortened life but did not want anyone at work or in our neighborhood to know, lest they regard him as weak or vulnerable. We learned to help him at home. But we never learned to ask our neighbors for help.

I've been trying to unlearn those lessons for a long time. And the work we do today at Citizen University is in many ways about unlearning lessons of rugged individualism. It's why we gather here for Civic Saturday. Are there more obvious civic messages to deliver to you? Yes, starting with: Vote! Vote early! But there may not be a more important message in these times than "Ask someone for help."

In Britain, where the government has taken the radical step of creating a Ministry of Loneliness, writers and activists and social entrepreneurs are trying creatively to refill the third space, to rebuild the civic commons. An author from Britain named Hillary Cottam has written a book called *Radical Help* and in it she describes a variety of experiments – in care for the aging, in mentorship of the young, in the workplace and in the home – where everyday citizens are trying help each other by forming clubs and mutual-aid societies without relying only or even primarily on the welfare state.

None of the experiments she describes is, on its own, a game-changer. But that's the nature of systems. If a hundred or a thousand Britons follow her example and develop their own experiments, then their society will be on a path to renewal and not decay.

We have to rebuild the webs of mutual aid that make a sanctuary like Fremont Abbey, a neighborhood like Fremont, a city like Seattle, a state like Washington, and a nation like the United States remain resilient enough not to shatter in a crisis. Because the crisis is here. We will do that face-to-face. We will do that by identifying something that needs doing and then asking someone to help us do it. We will do that with all the open-heartedness and all the unseen savvy of Mr. Rogers asking simple questions for children that crack open the hardened hearts of adults. *Won't you be my neighbor?*

A week ago, several members of our Citizen University team were in Memphis, Tennessee to hold a CitizenFEST. At the close of that gathering, we showed the participants how to run a mutual-aid circle. How to put a project or a need into the middle of that circle. How to ask others for help, and how to sharpen that ask into something people can respond to. How to invite people to make hard commitments of help. And how good it feels to make that commitment.

One of the participants was a woman named Lindsay who had grown up on the rough streets of West Memphis but spent years away and only recently moved back with her three children. Those two boys and one girl, all preteens, were there with her at CitizenFEST. And when I asked Lindsay why she'd come and why she'd brought her kids, she said it was to teach them how to step outside your smallest circle, the same way she had taught them to meet and greet their new neighbors in West Memphis: so they will know you if you need their help.

To ask someone for help is to help *them*. This, we know, is the magic secret of social cohesion. To ask someone for help is also to recognize our limits, which is to live within

them, which is to be free of illusions, which in the end is to be truly free. To ask someone for help is to practice not the rapacious liberty of the sociopath but the moral liberty of the citizen.

You can read your Tocqueville and you can sing your Kris Kristofferson. Or you can hear a story like the story of Uncle Frederick, who reminds us that the helpless are not powerless. Or you can meet a single parent like Lindsay, who reminds us, as the saying goes, that there is no such thing as a single parent – that every person in that situation is held by a web of relationship and obligation, to kin and to acquaintances and to the strangers nearby who don't yet know that they can be of help. Those strangers nearby are really citizens-in-waiting. Dormant friends. Let's awaken them, and our freedom. Let's ask each other for help.

**Readings to Precede the Sermon**  
**October 20, 2018**

**Alexis de Tocqueville**  
**From *Democracy in America***  
**Published 1835**

I have also had occasion to show how the increasing love of well-being and the shifting character of property make democratic peoples afraid of material disturbances. Love of public peace is often the only political passion which they retain, and it alone becomes more active and powerful as all the others fade and die. This naturally disposes the citizens constantly to give the central government new powers, or to let it take them, for it alone seems both anxious and able to defend them from anarchy by defending itself.

Since in times of equality no man is obliged to put his powers at the disposal of another, and no one as any claim of right to substantial support from his fellow man, each is both independent and weak. These two conditions, which must be neither seen quite separately nor confused, give the citizen of a democracy extremely contradictory instincts. He is full of confidence and pride in his independence among his equals, but from time to time his weakness makes him feel the need for some outside help which he cannot expect from any of his fellows, for they are both impotent and cold. In this extremity he naturally turns his eyes toward that huge entity which alone stands out above the universal level of abasement. His needs, and even more his longings, continually put him in mind of that entity, and he ends by regarding it as the sole and necessary support of his individual weakness.

**Me and Bobby McGee**  
**Written by Fred L. Foster & Kris Kristofferson**  
**Performed by Janis Joplin**

Busted flat in Baton Rouge, waitin' for a train  
And I's feelin' near as faded as my jeans  
Bobby thumbed a diesel down, just before it rained  
It rode us all the way to New Orleans

I pulled my harpoon out of my dirty red bandanna  
I was playin' soft while Bobby sang the blues, yeah  
Windshield wipers slappin' time, I was holdin' Bobby's hand in mine  
We sang every song that driver knew

Freedom's just another word for nothin' left to lose  
Nothin', don't mean nothin' hon' if it ain't free, no no  
And, feelin' good was easy, Lord, when he sang the blues  
You know, feelin' good was good enough for me  
Good enough for me and my Bobby McGee

From the Kentucky coal mine to the California sun  
There Bobby shared the secrets of my soul  
Through all kinds of weather, through everything we done  
Yeah, Bobby baby kept me from the cold

One day up near Salinas, Lord, I let him slip away  
He's lookin' for that home, and I hope he finds it  
But, I'd trade all of my tomorrows, for a single yesterday  
To be holdin' Bobby's body next to mine

Freedom's just another word for nothin' left to lose  
Nothin', that's all that Bobby left me, yeah  
But, feelin' good was easy, Lord, when he sang the blues  
Hey, feelin' good was good enough for me, mm-hmm  
Good enough for me and my Bobby McGee