

## **Civic Saturday**

**July 28, 2018**

**“Promises” by Erin Kelley**

### **Civic Readings**

#### **Treaty with the Six Nations**

**1794**

The President of the United States having determined to hold a conference with the Six Nations of Indians, for the purpose of removing from their minds all causes of complaint, and establishing a firm and permanent friendship with them . . .

[agrees] on the following articles:

*ARTICLE I.* Peace and friendship are hereby firmly established, and shall be perpetual, between the United States and the Six Nations.

*ARTICLE II.* The United States acknowledge the lands reserved to the [Six Nations as] . . . their property; and the United States will never claim the same, nor disturb them . . . .

#### ***Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams***

***March 31, 1776***

. . . I have sometimes been ready to think that the passion for Liberty cannot be equally strong in the breasts of those who have been accustomed to deprive their fellow Creatures of theirs . . . . I long to hear that you have declared an independency—and by the way in the new Code of Laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make, I desire you would remember the Ladies, and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the Husbands. Remember, all Men would be tyrants if they could. If particular care and attention is not paid to the Ladies we are determined to foment a Rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any Laws in which we have no voice or representation.

## ***The True Americanism***

**Speech by Carl Schurz**

**January 2, 1896**

### ***The True Americanism by Carl Schurz (January 2, 1896)***

What is the rule of honor to be observed by a power so strongly and so advantageously situated as this Republic is? Of course I do not expect it meekly to pocket real insults. . . . But, surely, it should not, as our boyish jingoes wish it to do, swagger about among the nations of the world, with a chip on its shoulder, shaking its fist in everybody's face. . . . [I]t should not, whenever its own notions of right or interest collide with the notions of others, fall into hysterics and act as if it really feared for its own security and its very independence. . . . In its dealings with other nations it should have scrupulous regard, not only for their rights, but also for their self-respect. . . . It should be so invariably just and fair, so trustworthy, so good tempered, so conciliatory, that other nations would instinctively turn to it as their mutual friend. . . . There has, of late, been much loose speech about "Americanism." Is not this good Americanism? It is surely today the Americanism of those who love their country most. And I fervently hope that it will be and ever remain the Americanism of our children and our children's children.

## **Sermon**

### ***Opening***

For those who attended Civic Saturday last April, you'll remember we talked about being a "good citizen." About how being a good citizen in a universal sense isn't about legal status or documentation, but about showing up for one another in public life and using our citizen power for not just ourselves, but others. (As a reminder, if the idea of "citizen power" really resonated with you, I encourage you to check out Citizen University and especially the books and talks of Eric Liu.)

This idea of "citizens showing up for each other" is one I haven't been able to let go of. But, by show of hands, when it comes to summoning up the energy to show up in civic life, how many of you have been struggling?

I have. In fact, it's been exhausting lately and drafting this sermon in particular was a real challenge.

From mid-May to mid-June, I was traveling internationally. My husband and I took a dream vacation and cycled from Amsterdam to Brugge. We met an American couple who had chucked it all, bought a boat, learned to sail, and were navigating various European rivers. Sounds awesome, right? Well, they were doing this because they'd given up on America.

We met street artists, ferry operators, and wait staff who upon hearing our accents, would . . . change. The energy shifted. Some would even ask, in one way or another, "What is going on in your country?"

I've been fortunate to travel a lot in my life and to even live overseas at different points. I've never encountered situations like these.

After getting back from Europe, I literally got on another plane 36 hours later and flew to Israel. I had been invited to join a women's study to meet with both Israeli and Palestinian peace activists.

Two things about that trip really stand out in my mind: One, we crossed heavily guarded border checkpoints to get in and out of the West Bank and into Ramallah. In that process we drove along and through "the wall" that separates Israelis and Palestinians.

We also went to Yad Vashem, Israel's national site of remembrance to the Holocaust. I have a background working in museums, and even I think calling Yad Vashem a "museum" trivializes it. It's a memorial to more than 6 million dead. A memorial to more than 6 million families separated and destroyed.

These two experiences are burned into my memory in part because of what I came home to.

I didn't monitor U.S. news during either time abroad. When I landed in Newark on Friday, June 15, I was greeted with a news feed filled with images of families being separated. Images of children literally being warehoused in an abandoned

WalMart. There seemed to be even louder than usual rhetoric about the need for “walls” to separate “us” and “them.”

It was a jarring juxtaposition. I felt as if I were viewing my country through this really horrific and weird funhouse mirror. This return was the most surreal and painful homecoming I’ve ever had.

I came home to a land I love – I wouldn’t be doing this Civic Saturday thing if I didn’t *love* America – and was forcefully reminded that the roots of hate run deep. Hate is like a weed; it just keeps popping back up. Pulling out those roots is hard work that will never be finished. Never. That’s a harsh homecoming.

As much as I love to travel, I love coming home. I love coming home to this country because of what it stands for and for the promises it holds.

America *is* a land of promises. Big, beautiful, audacious, bold, juicy promises. But promises made are not always promises kept.

It’s just taking a lot of energy to continue to show up. I’ve been trying to find energy by surrounding myself with people I care about. I’ve been taking a lot of depth breaths.

And I’ve been focusing on something both tragic and comforting: Treating “others,” especially non-white “others” this way, isn’t new. All of this has happened before and somehow we’ve gotten through it. But too often we have failed to get through it in ways that have addressed the harm done. We have to stop doing that! We have to stop forgetting the past, the harms done, and that it takes constant, never-ending work to fulfill America’s promises.

Today we’re going talk about promises. We’re going talk about:

- 1.) **Broken Promises.** Because we have to. We have to know our past so we stop repeating it.
- 2.) **Expanded Promises.** While America has a legacy of broken promises, it also has a legacy of patriots who demanded an expansion of the American promise.

3.) **New Promises.** I want to talk about the need for a re-imagined connection and obligation to the American promise and what it will take from each of us to support that vision.

### **Broken Promises**

First, what is the American promise?

Here's how I think of it. This nation is built on the idea of self-government. The idea that we humans are intrinsically equipped to organize and manage ourselves. We do not need to be "subjects" under a ruler, but rather have the capacity to do the job of governing on our own.

Embedded in these founding notions are values tied to human dignity and self-worth. So the American Promise, it's about justice. It's about equality under the law. It's about being treated with fairness not because of your class or caste, place of birth, religion, ethnicity, or gender but because we have inherent worth as individual humans.

As we discussed at the last Civic Saturday, however, Enlightenment Era ideals and Enlightenment Era reality are two different things.

We need to be unafraid of wrestling with that truth; that hypocrisy. We must talk about more than American ideals and promises. We also have to talk about the shameful and painful stuff in our past.

OUR past.

Not the past of this group or that group . . . *our past*. Our history. Not talking about it doesn't make it go away.

I'm going to spend a few minutes talking about three shameful chapters when America tragically broke its promises. I bring up these broken promises because knowing our full story—and incorporating it into our national narrative—makes us strong.

It makes us strong when we take the time to honor the fact the American story isn't the same for every American because it helps us better see each other. And when we better see each other, but we can better show up for each other.

Broken promise #1:

America was built on slave labor. The promise of equality and freedom were broken before the nation was even founded. Not reckoning with that has haunted us for centuries. Not understanding how breaking those fundamental promises at the very birth of our nation is what has allowed racism to influence every system and structure around us today. It is why we still struggle with race. Owning this past is the first step we have to take in undoing the harm of racism; the first step to mending a horribly broken promise that has rippled throughout other tragic moments.

Broken promise #2:

America annihilated Native peoples. Not by accident. Not by happenstance. And not because that's what conquering nations do. It was a racist act. Whether by bullets, smallpox infected blankets, or forced marches and starvation, America tried to erase its indigenous people. From 1500 to 1900 a land filled with millions of inhabitants, plummeted to just a couple hundred thousand. Not only were our big & beautiful promises of self-determination and justice denied to Native Americans, but every treaty signed between this government and Native peoples has been violated. We have a moral obligation to never forget, as Suzan Shown Harjo of the Cheyenne and Hodulgee Muscogee people's reminds us: "[To] The people who are citizens of the U.S., these are your treaties. They aren't just the Indians' treaties."

Broken promise #3:

During World War II, America put its Japanese-American citizens into internment camps. Anti-Asian bigotry is why these camps existed. They did not exist because of confirmed acts of treason that were uncovered by the 5<sup>th</sup> amendment's promise of due process. These citizens never received the Constitutional promise of due process. A promise, by the way, the courts have repeatedly said, belong to all people in this country, not just legally-defined citizens.

I'm not sharing this history because I want to bash America or because I think collective guilt is somehow beneficial. To the contrary, I think collective guilt wastes a lot of energy that could go elsewhere.

But, I absolutely don't think blindly ignoring our history is a sign of love or patriotism.

Blind love is stupid love. Blind love gets people hurt and blind love hurts in return.

Patriots do not love blindly.

And, patriots, as I believe Carl Schurz and Abigail Adams were, speak truth to power even when it is painful; especially when it is painful and inconvenient. That's how the promise begins to expand. With truth-telling.

### **Expanded Promises:**

People like Schurz and Adams (who we heard in our civic readings) help remind us that our legacy includes more than broken promises. It includes patriots who fought for their rights and the rights of others. Fighting for some semblance of equality – fighting to expand the promise of America – this is also who we are.

How many of you are familiar with Abigail Adams or Carl Schurz?

Let's begin with Abigail. She was the counselor, advisor, and wife of John Adams – signatory on the Declaration of Independence and 2<sup>nd</sup> president of the United States. The reason Abigail and John's letters are so amazing is because she was brilliant and her husband clearly valued and relied on her opinion regarding domestic and foreign policy.

I was a senior in high school when I first heard the name Abigail Adams. My English teacher, Mrs. Abrams, read aloud the "Remember the Ladies" letter. I remember being nothing short of awe-struck. I had taken every history and political science course my school offered and this was *the very first* primary source I had been exposed to from a woman's point of view.

There she was, 18<sup>th</sup> century "saucy" Abigail (as John referred to her) holding her own with insights on various military and political machinations of the day while

simultaneously reminding her husband not to be so self-righteous as to forget his own complicity in the tyranny over women like her.

Think about that. America – a scraggly and rebellious colony with minimal resources was about to start a war with the world’s mightiest nation – and rather than send her husband a soothing letter telling him “Baby, you got this,” she jumps right into the harsh reality of what it is to be a woman in a man’s world and calls out his privilege.

Past, present, and future, women of all colors and backgrounds have and always will play a role in America’s story. Abigail Adams’ letter to John demonstrates how, from the very beginning, marginalized groups knew America’s promise needed to be expanded. They knew America was called to be more. And they knew that tough truths had to be spoken even at inconvenient times.

There has never been a “perfect” moment in American history where everyone has been treated equally or fairly. Abigail’s letter, written 2 months *before* America’s founding, reminds us there is no greatness to reach back for, but rather, an ever-possible greatness to strive for.

As a quick aside: I’m referring to Abigail Adams as a patriot, but in all likelihood she would not have referred to herself this way. The word “patriot” – like “citizen” as we discussed last April – has a history. During the Revolutionary War Era, patriots were men. It was a masculine term. Obviously, the gendered nature of “patriot” has changed. “Patriot” is still the kind of word, the kind of idea, that is often claimed by one group or another. Unfortunately, it is often used to divide instead of to unite. That’s a shame, because “patriotism” is about love. And Abigail loved her new country. Abigail was a patriot.

American history is filled with these kinds of patriots. Patriots who understand the importance of truth-telling. (They don’t hide from the past.) Patriots who understand military bravado and jingoistic speeches are neither the pinnacle of patriotism or the best way to live up to our promises.

Carl Schurz was one of those people. He started his political career alongside Abraham Lincoln. He served as a Union general in the Civil War and a Republican



U.S. Senator from Missouri. His career also included service as a diplomat and as Secretary of the Interior.

Carl Schurz was a man of public service. He pushed for the expansion of voting rights and the promise of full citizenship to not only the formerly enslaved, but to immigrant newcomers.

And he did this during an era of America's growing might on the world stage. He fought American imperialistic goals and believed if we as a nation had any kind of "manifest destiny," it was to broker peace and promote justice.

Schurz never shied away from criticizing what he saw as American arrogance. He didn't give the speeches he gave and fight the political battles he fought because he hated America or was ashamed of it. He loved America and he was proud of where he believed our nation's values emanated.

He loved the potential of the American promise and in its strength to expand and include others than just a privileged few like himself.

Abigail Adams, Carl Schurz, and so many others leave us a powerful and patriotic legacy to live up to. So, how do we want to live up that legacy?

### **New Promises:**

I think the answer to that question is that we need to get busy making new promises.

We need to re-commit and promise that we will do the work that needs to be done to make this democracy vibrant, giving, and whole *for everyone*.

So, here are some "new" promises I'm asking us to dedicate ourselves to:

#### **New Promise #1:**

Let's stop forgetting. Learn and share our history so that it will never again be okay for progress being born on the backs of others. Too often in American history we have come to crossroads where groups have been sold out for the sake of political expediency. (Think: The Compromise of 1877 that ended

Reconstruction and permitted Jim Crow, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 that turned hardworking Chinese immigrants into scapegoats for our economic woes, or even the corporate interests that won over the rights of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe.). No more. We cannot be okay with democracy operating outside the lessons of history. We need to fight for history – the humanities – in schools, in public discourse, and in our own lives.

#### New Promise #2:

Be a proud patriot. Claim patriotism. As tempting as it is to chuck it all and make a new life or simply to stop reading the news, we can't. We must embrace the full range of responsibilities we inherit as Americans. And that's more than just voting and celebrating the fun stuff. It's about standing up even when our legs are exhausted. And speaking out at inconvenient times. We need work to define patriotism in the way Carl Schurz did in 1899:

"I confidently trust that the American people will prove themselves ... too wise not to detect the false pride or the dangerous ambitions or the selfish schemes which so often hide themselves under that deceptive cry of mock patriotism: 'Our country, right or wrong!' They will not fail to recognize that our dignity, our free institutions and the peace and welfare of this and coming generations of Americans will be secure only as we cling to the watchword of *true* patriotism: 'Our country—when right to be kept right; when wrong to be put right.'"

#### New Promise #3:

The promise we absolutely, crucially must make in order to live up to all those promises combined: Love each other.

I've dropped the word "love" into this sermon several times today. Maybe we "love" a candidate or a party. We certainly love winning on Election Day, but I'm not talking about that kind of political love.

At this very moment, America is being tested on whether it wants to live up to the ideal that all people are equal . . . that all people have inherent worth and should be treated with dignity . . . or if it wants to live down to a "tribalized" set of beliefs summed up by George Orwell in *Animal Farm*: "[We're all] equal, but some ... more equal than others."

Yes, we need thoughtful, reasoned, evidence-based policy to help guide the country. But we also need love. Deep-rooted love that helps us stay strong. That helps us find the energy to forever work at pulling out those weeds of hate. This love goes beyond parties and politics and allows us to see each other as fellow humans, as fellow citizens. And when we disagree, to see each other as adversaries rather than enemies.

Love is what we need to see each other; to hear each other. To extend a hand to each other.

That love can be hard to find, I know. As an old hymn says, “There is more love somewhere.”

And more hope, more peace, more joy. We just have to keep on until we find it.

I ask you to please keep on. Please keep believing that the American promise is worth fighting. Don't quit. Even when it gets really hard ... take a deep breath, know (in some way or another) we've been here before—and we can get through it. We just have to promise to love each other so that we can show up for each other and get through it all in better and more *promising* ways.