

Sermon for the Second Sunday in Lent

The Rev. Brooks Cato

I want to take a minute this morning to talk about politics. I know, this is a big shock. Every so often, I get a touch of feedback about how us preachers need to stay out of politics. Look, I'm not gonna tell y'all which campaign signs to put out. Believe it or not, I'm careful not to cross that line, and as long as being Episcopalian's legal, a lot of daylight remains between what I've said from this pulpit and what I can't. Preachers have always been told to "just stick to the Gospel." Look at Thomas Beckett. And I get that. Jesus' message is the reason we're here, and the Gospel is how we hear that message. The problem is that the Gospel doesn't expect a separation of church and state. There was no separation whether you were Roman, Jewish, or one of those weird new followers of Jesus. Caesar was emperor and a god. The Sanhedrin was the religious governing body, legislative assembly, and judicial arm of the government. Followers of Jesus reassigned titles for the emperor. They told his story intertwined with political figures, Herod the Great, Pontius Pilate, and Herod Antipas to name a few. He was mockingly crucified as the King of the Jews; y'all, that was a political jab. They touted the arrival of the Kingdom of God which would overturn all human governments and replace them with the ideal expression of human existence.

Let's look at some of Jesus' more well-known Gospel moments. Take the Beatitudes. At least a quarter of 'em are political, like this one: "Blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth." Not the wealthy, not the powerful, not the politicians, the meek. After his arrest by the police and the military, he was taken to Pilate, the Governor, to be tried and executed as a political prisoner. After being tortured, Jesus tells the governor, "You would have no power over me unless it had been given from above." In other words, your cute little political system thinks it's in control, but no matter what you do to me, God's still in charge. What about "Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's?" That's not "pay your taxes, at least not only "pay your taxes;" it's making it clear that there are some things that belong to the rulers of this world but there are also things that don't. Caesar had control over the tax rolls, but he didn't have control over God's Creation, no matter how puffed up he became.

So, the claim that modern preachers ought to stay out of politics by just sticking to the Bible reveals a misapprehension of Jesus' life and message. On top of that, even when religion stays in the so-called appropriate realm, it's been co-opted and stepped on by the political world. There are parts of our country where it's not legal to give food to the homeless.¹ Local governments regularly embrace "hostile architecture" to ensure no one can find a comfortable-enough place to sleep.² Caring for children, especially the poor, has turned into massive cuts to school meals, loss of medical care, and even removal from the country all done at the hands of the government.^{3,4} For what it's worth, I'm not talking solely about those in charge right now. This kind of stuff's been happening for a long time, maybe forever, which is exactly why it's incumbent on people of faith to stand up and demand what's ours to care for.

So what is ours to care for? Widows and children regularly make the list. Foreigners, too. Inhibiting abuses by the wealthy, that's ours. Promoting the needs of the expelled, the exiled, refugees, outcasts, oppressed peoples. Feeding the hungry, caring for the sick, visiting the imprisoned. That's all Biblical. Even more, hiding political dissidents (that's the story of Rahab), embracing a rehabilitated killer of an

¹<https://www.salon.com/2023/08/07/criminalizing-the-samaritan-why-cities-across-the-us-are-making-it-illegal-to-feed-the-homeless/>

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/08/nyregion/hostile-architecture-nyc.html>

³ <https://www.newsweek.com/map-shows-states-most-impacted-school-meal-funding-cut-2043730>

⁴ <https://firstfocus.org/news/new-figures-show-4-4-million-children-without-health-insurance/>

⁵<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/us-citizen-child-recovering-brain-cancer-deported-mexico-undocumented-rcna196049>

agent of the state (that's Moses), crafting the downfall of a political advisor (that's Esther), assassinating the commander of an oppressive regime's military (that's Jael). There's lots of ways our story shows up in politics and vice versa. I'm not saying y'all need To go out and gather up your murderous tent pegs, but I am saying the line we've got now just wasn't there back then. These are the stories and the demands of our scripture: to follow the Gospel, to preach the Gospel, to live into the Gospel. And that requires each and every one of us looking at every aspect of our world, including the political realm, and naming what's broken. And if you can name it, you can address it, and if you can address it, you can change it. And if it falls short of the standard set by that same Gospel and you can change it, why would you let a concern like the discomfort of preaching politics stop you?

I know there're reasons to be careful, but I've yet to encounter a single compelling reason as to why we should abandon the Gospel because it might get political. If a politician makes a claim about anything we believe, does it suddenly become outside of our reach? A politician can quote the Bible, claim Jesus would support their legislation, define themselves as saved by God all while good Christians are expected to demurely uphold our side of the separation of church and state -- it's a double standard. They don't get to define who we are or how we should live into our faith. And I can promise you, they wouldn't like it one bit if we actually "stuck to the Gospel" 'cause that Gospel wouldn't let the political world get away with the abuses they allow and promote. In that respect, maybe we should "just stick to the Gospel." As Paul says, speaking about the gospel, "For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears. Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven." This, mind you, after Jesus directly insulted the head of the local government.

It's time to talk about this stuff now especially, because the same amendment that assures us the ability to practice our faith as we see fit's abused on a daily basis. This should matter to church people 'cause the rest of that amendment's our legislative neighbors. The press is being abridged, speech is grounds for arrest, and assembly is met with handcuffs.⁶ Y'all've probably heard about the mess at Columbia where two people've been arrested for protesting, one of 'em a green card holder. Or there's the woman I mentioned a couple of weeks back, the citizen that was dragged out of the Town Hall for speaking up. I know, some of y'all might not agree with them, but they have as much right to demonstrate as anyone else. Even the KKK 's allowed to have demonstrations.⁹ Strange, isn't it, that their demonstrations come with police escorts, not police crackdowns?¹⁰ Hmm, strange indeed.

Anyway, there's so much chipping away at these enshrined rights that we can't afford to ignore what's happening, and we can't stand aside and watch while it does. I know the slippery slope's a logical fallacy but every indication we've seen so far points to continued erosion. The abuse or the potential loss of any phrase within that amendment should make us very, very nervous. And it's already happening. Let me put this differently. As a Christian, would you like to keep supporting our Ukrainian friends? The government wants to deport them.¹² As a Christian, would you like to continue feeding the hungry on

⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/mar/15/trump-media-attacks>

⁷ <https://apnews.com/article/trump-bondi-patel-justice-fbi-retribution-ec275e730c6e75f2d6ee29eeec30fa07>

⁸ <https://www.compactmag.com/article/yes-mahmoud-khalils-arrest-is-a-free-speech-issue/>

⁹ <https://edition.cnn.com/2025/02/08/us/cincinnati-ohio-nazi-flags/index.html>

¹⁰ <https://www.gettyimages.co.nz/detail/video/members-of-the-ku-klux-klan-arrive-with-a-police-escort-news-footage/1151748571>

¹¹ <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/hidden-plain-sight-racism-white-supremacy-and-far-right-militancy-law>

¹² <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/trump-plans-revoke-legal-status-ukrainians-who-fled-us-sources-say-2025-03-06/>

Monday nights? The USDA just cut a billion dollars from food programs.¹³ As a Christian, would you like us to keep on marrying gay people? At least 5 states want the Supreme Court to take that sacrament away.¹⁴ Tell me again how this isn't any of our business. Tell me again how "just sticking to the Gospel" keeps us separated from the state. Tell me again what Jesus would do when the state of our time treads on our ministries. I can tell you what the Bible and Jesus and the great line of prophets said about the state in their times, but if I do, it might get a little uncomfortable 'cause they weren't worried about getting "too political."

Y'all, I know Sunday mornings are nice when they're kinda chill and the preacher's nice and chill, too. I know some of us come here for solace. I know some of us just want to get away from bad news. I pray we get to that place again, but for now we don't have the luxury of comforting the already comfortable. Until we get to that promised Kingdom of God, our scripture never promises a time when we can sit back and relax and just let the world be for a year or four. This is a comfort-the-afflicted-and-afflict-the-comfortable era. The Gospel demands that of us, Christ's calls for justice demand that, the prophets' calls for mercy, God's calls for standing up to hardened hearts, y'all, it's what we do. But churches have occupied a privileged space for so long that many never had to see the Church stand up and maybe thought that meant the Church shouldn't stand up. But here's the thing. When the Church stands up, we change the world. And when we don't, well, a hundred years later we apologize for our inaction and complicity.¹⁵ Don't let the fallacy of Christian complacency get in the way of living out our faith. And don't embarrass the Christians of the future with our failure to live as they and Christ would have us.

We answer to God and the Great Cloud of Witnesses. We do God and the white robed martyrs a great disservice when we let the desire for decorum outweigh our scriptural, baptismal, theological, and even liturgical mandates. Jesus wasn't the only one to offer his blood so that we might live. Stone and lion and flame and cross and sword and cannon and gun and bomb obliterated people of many faiths throughout history so that all of us might come to the freedom of this place. But *we* sit firmly in that long line of Christians willing to give up considerably more than polite discourse to serve our God and ensure another generation can serve our God a little longer. It's time to stand up, and it's time to be Christians. Like Abram, a deep and terrifying dark has descended on us, but with a little faith and a lot of work, we still stand a chance of having spiritual descendants to remember us by. So with that in mind, maybe I will, maybe we will take that advice. When it comes to politics, y'all, just stick to the Gospel.

¹³ <https://www.politico.com/news/2025/03/10/usda-cancels-local-food-purchasing-for-schools-food-banks-00222796>

¹⁴ <https://www.livenowfox.com/news/republican-lawmakers-same-sex-marriage-scotus>

¹⁵ https://www.episcopalarchives.org/cgi-bin/acts/acts_search.pl