There is a regular confusion about the nature of the relationship between church and state.

In the American context, so far as I can tell, there are at least three forms of this belief.

First, that the wall between church and state is so severe that religious practice is merely private, and in so far that it is expressed communally, it does not leave the walls of the church.

Second, a robust view that seeks to enforce a narrow reading of Christian faith through the mechanisms of the civil state.

Three, that the disestablishment of church and state does not prohibit people of faith from advocating for matters of import, so long as our advocacy does not slip into the second view.

The further complication is that, especially among American Christians, there is a fundamental misunderstanding of politics as *always* partisan. But politics, generally understood, is (perhaps) nothing more than how we define and distribute power. Politics, secular or otherwise, is an organizing principle. We may express and order ourselves along partisan lines, but this has very little to do with how we *make decisions* (the rules of the game) and the outcomes of that decision making process.

This is an important point. I have argued (and preached!) that Christian faith that is grounded in an inclusive, love-based understanding of scripture has, to the detriment of American civil society, vacated the public sphere. In its place is a Christianity that is hardly recognizable in even the most cursory reading of the New Testament.

This is not to say that prophetic, *house of love* based Christianity has completely disappeared. Clearly, many of us who are associated with the Council have a deep connection to it – many of us were shaped by it. Arguably the major social movements in American society occurred because of it.

But the reality today is that much of our society, secular or otherwise, is defined by fear, greed, and a deep cynicism about our ability to move into *a new way of being*. We continue to pour new wine into old skins.

Much of this is not helped by the fact that too many people, including Christians, have mythological commitments to the formation of our nation, beliefs that insert their own contemporary readings of Christian faith onto the past. Despite the philosophical and historical reality that most of our founding thinkers were committed to the ideals of the Enlightenment (and Deism), there is the persistent narrative that the United States was either founded with Christian commitments or as a place exclusively for Christians.

Neither view is accurate.

The many permutations of Christian faith are undoubtedly always in the background. It would be absurd to argue that they are never present.

At the same time, the project of American democracy, the brilliance of the disestablishment of Church and state, reflects the essential political reality that the freedom to worship (or not worship) is a critical feature in the maintenance of our democratic norms.

We are free to be *love-based* advocates, to preach prophetically for liberation, because we understand that our participation in that advocacy is our free response to God's grace. God can no more force our participation that we can (or should) force it in others.

As we head towards holy week, let us recall that Jesus' preaching, Jesus' critique of power, was fundamentally political. His challenge to Roman Imperial power was so direct that he was crucified for it.

But Easter reminds us that even the greatest political power on earth, with every tool of death at its disposal, cannot overcome resurrection. The cross is the story of resurrection in the face of death, love in the midst of fear.

Peace and grace to all as we head through Holy Week – may Easter prepare us for the prophetic witness of love yet to come.

Amen.