

Mel Smith Lecture - February 7, 2013

Trinity Western University
Northwest Lecture Hall

Speaker: Benno Friesen

A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the House

Good evening,

I want to congratulate the Smith family for their generosity to the students at TWU. They have been very generous over the years with their scholarships and I know two Friesen's who received the Mel Smith Scholarship *obviously they are from the smart side of the family tree*. I remember the days when I was in North Western, tuition was high and the bank account was low and I know how important these scholarships are, not only for the cash but for the encouragement it gave me, so I am pleased that Mel Smith was able to establish this.

I also have some issues of *Cardus Magazines*, I don't know if you are familiar with the organization. Cardus takes its name from the Roman intersection of the streets and the organization is designed to create discussion. It is a marketplace of ideas; it is filled with articles on political science, on the arts and it is cross cultural, cross denominational, cross unbelievers in the gospel and that's the kind of discussion that we have to have nowadays. I have some extra copies out in the lobby and you are welcome to take them. With my Mennonite roots, I shudder to say I am giving them to you for free, but there you go. Nick are you going to have an offering here tonight to pay for this? You're Dutch right.....now there is a guy who has fallen away from his roots, but we appreciate you Nick as chair of the Mel Smith Committee.

In my last year of teaching here (at Trinity Western University) I was teaching a freshman English class. We were reading Saint Joan and I don't remember the classes, I don't remember the exam, I don't remember the question I had on the exam - but I remember one answer from one of the students. For me it was memorable that I took the quote with me to Ottawa and incorporated it into my first speech in the House of Commons. This student's quote was as follows: "what Shaw is saying here is - we should not become so entrenched in our cause that we forget about our own humanity and consequent imperfection." I have wondered over the years, how it can be that we can be so firm in our speech. We believe that we are imperfect, we are broken people and that none of us are perfect - but don't try to change my mind. It just doesn't add up for me.

So let me take you *in medias res* as we say in literature, in the middle of the thing and give you some of my experience. I was on the McGraw Commission for parliamentary reform, which is now gathering dust in one of the shelves in Ottawa. But in order to prepare ourselves for that paper, the committee went to London to meet with the mother of Parliaments and the bureaucrats who look after it there. One of hosts said he would take me on a tour, and we walked in from the back of the building through the cloakroom and there was row, upon row, upon row of coat hangers for all the members of the parliament in London. Each coat hanger had a red ribbon on it and he chuckled and said "you know

what that is? That's to remind us of the days when we would bring our swords to the House of Commons." That's when this ritual started in the 1500s and 1600s and even to this day, in the House of Commons, the government sits on one side and the opposition on the other and they are two and a half sword lengths apart. Guess why it is two and a half; that way you can't quite reach the other side. To check this out we walked through the chamber - saw that two and a half sword length space and walked up to the back door. Winston Churchill was smart enough to make the chamber, After World War II, the bombed out chamber was rebuilt by Winston Churchill. He made sure it was too small to take all the members so that only those people who were really serious about sitting in the house, would be there and the rest of them would have to sit either in the foyer or up in the galleries.

So as my guide took me through that door, we went into the foyer took a hard right for about thirty paces and there to my left was the most gorgeous stained glass window that you want to see. It had to be thirty feet high, intricately designed, intricately built, gorgeous piece of artistry. You can't walk by it without stopping to look at it. From there you turn right and you go into the hall, Westminster Hall and the Brits always have something special about something they want to highlight and that hall is the largest hall in England that was built of a single beam of oak. So you can imagine it is really immense. You walk down the steps in that hall and you go to the middle of the floor and there is a brass plate and on that plate is an inscription, *this is where the court was held which led to the execution of Charles I.* We are talking parliamentary democracy here aren't we? So picture this now, behind you is the beauty and artistry of that window and in front of you is the almost bloodstained plaque where the dictator Cromwell made sure that Charles would not leave the country alive.

So you go out of the building, go down a mile or two to the Thames River and there is the Tower of London where Charles I lost his life. That is parliamentary democracy four hundred - five hundred years ago. And you say that is a bloody messy and it is because we as people are messy, not because the buildings are. And so if you want to have parliamentary reform and think you can start with a building, forget it! Human nature is such that we find a way around that before you know it.

Nick you will remember this, the first few weeks of Mr. Vander Zalm's government, one of the first bills they passed was a new tax on real estate transactions. Not on the real estate but on the transaction of doing the real estate and we all wondered what in the world was going on. Don't worry about it, in three days the accountants and the lawyers found a way around it so they didn't have to pay all that tax.

I was on the McGraw Commission and we brought forward some changes to the House of Commons. We recommended that the Speaker be elected. We said that would be a great thing because up until that time, the government always appointed the speaker. You can probably guess the comments regarding the appointment - "that guys a toady for the Prime Minister, etc." We wanted to end that practice so we recommended that the government accept the recommendation. Guess what - do you think the house is better now than it was then? No, you don't want a guy who is beholden to the people that voted for him, what you want is a policeman not a politician.

I remember when I was new on the Hill and green as grass - I got up to ask a question. I spoke and opposition answered and as protocol I got up to ask another question because you are always entitled to a supplementary question. The assumption is that the minister didn't answer properly so you have a supplementary question ready at all times -right. I get up to ask my supplementary question on a totally different subject, and the minister says "that's no supplementary." I was down before you knew it.

That's the kind of speaker you want – end result - we brought that reform. Did that help? No, because we find a way around it. Now you get a twenty five second speech and maybe a question and then you get another twenty five second speech which is not an answer anyway and the show goes on.

So it doesn't matter what kind of structural reform you want or give, human nature is such that we are always looking for a way around it. We are always looking for something else rather than the real truth. They say the definition of question period is that you get a question to which you already know the answer and get an answer that has nothing to do with the question and that's the way it works. Now the trouble is that we have assumed that all of us are looking for the truth. The way I see it is that we are looking for advantage not truth and after years of ignoring this we get a toxic atmosphere in the House of Commons. I have said if we say can't we do better than this...then let's just shut it down!

If there are no differences or challenges philosophically, then none of us are right. We aren't learning if there aren't differences. If you had taken the English course I taught years ago, you would have heard of John Milton and *Aeropagitica* - he said that which purifies is fire that which purifies is trial; trial is by what is contrary. The virtue therefore which is but a youngling in the contemplation of evil and knows not the utmost that vice promises to her followers and rejects it is but a blank virtue not a pure. We have to have conflict however it doesn't have to be toxic. So what you get with conflict is a firm position and when the conflict hits you start rubbing off those things that are secondary tertiary value, it just wears it down until you get to the core truth.

All of these differences have a right to be on the table and if they have a right to be there, then we have to debate them. And that incidentally is the work of Cardus. It is to bring all of these different views onto the table. A lot of this went on when the puritans were in office right? When the puritans were in office they became a dictator because they were right. John Milton was a puritan and he didn't agree and therefore he wrote *Aeropagitica* because the issue was licensing of books -censorship in other words.

I was so concerned about the issue of censorship when I was elected because I didn't have a clue as to how I would address it. I had been an English teacher. I believed in free press and I saw a lot of stuff that I didn't like that was printed and circulated but I didn't think censorship was right. So Marge and I went to England and through a series of miracles, I got to meet Malcolm Muggeridge. He was in best form in those days. He started out as a non-believing socialist and ended up being a follower of Jesus years later having given up on his material socialism. He was a great publisher. I said to Malcolm, I have this problem - what do I do as I don't believe in censorship but I know there is a lot of material out there that shouldn't be published. Oh, he said, "that is easy; we all believe in censorship, we just don't all believe in what should be censored". The light went on and a few weeks later I was in a meeting in Vancouver and my conversation with Malcolm Muggeridge helped me out again. A friend of mine was in trouble over an argument of censorship and I was able to give him Malcolm's answer and it solved the day. So we have this difference and the differences have to be there if we are going to get truth and that is what a university is all about -to ensure that subjects that are obviously distasteful, subjects that are opposite, all get a hearing and are discussed honestly and publically. But does it have to be toxic?

One of the problems we have with people in politics is that we get put into boxes. I was just elected a year or so and I came home and met a fellow who I am sure had been one of my supporters. He asked me a question to which I gave my answer. His comment back to me was "oh well of course you would

say that -you're a politician". I hadn't been there long enough to get corrupted yet but I was already in a box. Years later a lady comes to see me in the office. She was concerned about an issue that she thought was a wrong government position. I listened to everything she had to say.... she was nice, polite and then after she was through - I explained to her why the government was doing what it was doing, what the policy was. When I was through you could see the shades go up like there was an alternative to this and as quickly as the shades went up they went down – her comment to me was “you are a good politician”. And you know you say to yourself - is there any hope when you get boxed in like that, what do you do? But it doesn't have to be that toxic; it can be done decently and in order.

As I think of the early years in the educational system was what we would call, the classical focused on the virtues; Socrates, Aristotle “all the boys from Athens”. All these guys in Greece who used to talk about the core issues of people, what it is that we should strive for - integrity, mercy, charity. Young people going to school would get caught in the classics in the original language and they got it. Then there was a change in the 19th century and we faced a new way of looking at things - it was called pragmatism.

Pragmatism says *do what you have to do to get it done, make sure it works* (I'm taking a shortcut on all this stuff) *the results are what count*. That's great if you are making a John Deere or a Cadillac or anything like that but it's pretty awful if you are dealing with people and organizations and governments. I don't have to tell you after watching the American elections a few months ago that winning is everything and it doesn't matter, there is no assessment of what is right or wrong or noble. Nobility does not play into it and so you have political ads which are toxic. You have character assassination and nobody's asking for truth. In fact Jimmy Carter's pollster was on television about this time and he said everybody asks only *what is your price*, nobody is asking *what are your ideals*.

Lester Pearson, his great dictum, said the first job of an MP is to get re-elected. Well, I didn't know that when I began in politics but I learned that in Ottawa, that's what it is all about - get re-elected..... you won't get the thing done if you don't get re-elected. Maybe this is why when I got there one of my colleagues said to me...this is the only mental institution in the country that is run by the patients. And you look around a while and you think he was right because of the odd, quirky **things** happening in the House.

One more story - in my last term Marge and I were invited to a state dinner in Vancouver. The King of Spain was in Vancouver and we were invited. We were the only people from parliament as I remember who attended. Had a great meal, the best bone china, the best food, great atmosphere, great conversation.... it was a nice evening. We went home and King Juan Carlos went on to Ottawa and so the story goes, he wanted to see the parliament buildings from the air. His handlers got a helicopter and he flew around the parliament buildings, the Peace Tower and the next day there was a photo on the front page of the Ottawa Citizen and a caption below it *Juan Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. We all thought that was a great caption.....

Well, as you can see I escaped the House. I've been gone nineteen years am still in withdrawal and slowly recuperating. So to change parliament you can't do it by changing the geography, you can't do it by changing the system - you do it by changing the people and that's why nobody wants to tackle it.

There is a great story of a man named Ian Bounds. You may not have heard of Ian - he wasn't a political person, he was a Methodist Preacher and lived in Missouri which was a slave state. He despised slavery

so that didn't put him in a very good position in Missouri. He was in favour with the union people, the northern half of the states except that the union needed money. So they dreamed up a scheme whereby you would take a loyalty oath and if you didn't take it you would have to pay \$500. Ian Bounds didn't have the money to pay in the first place and secondly he thought it was wrong so now he was on the outs with the slave states and with the free states. I believe he was imprisoned for a while and became a prison Chaplain to the southern troops.

Now I would say this guy had been around the block as he was knocked from pillar to post and the tension was severe because he was disloyal to both states. He came up with the statement that the church is looking for better methods; God is looking for better people. What we want to do is fix the machinery when we ought to fix ourselves.

I remember in the days when I was teaching here, I was walking across campus right about where the volleyball nets are and I was just musing, ...my great-grandparents came to Canada between 1875 and 1880 because they saw that the revolution was coming in Russia sooner or later it was going to be there and they would, if they stayed, they would be conscripted, they would be in deep trouble if they stayed in Russia and so they came, they sold their possessions at a fraction of the cost - came to Canada and started their family here. Now I say to myself supposing my great-grandparents hadn't done that where would I be? Would I be a communist today because I would have been born and raised and educated in Russia. And then my mind goes further and I say to myself, what about all the advantages that we have had by living in a country like Canada or the United States or any of the western countries where you have two thousand years of culture that has been spawned and spread by the gospel. From where did we get, for example, our criminal code? Where did we get the notion of having a minimum of two witnesses? Maybe it's from where Jesus said by the mouth of two or three witnesses shall every word be established and you look through the whole teachings of Corinthians chapter thirteen about loving your neighbor, the charities that abound in Canada and the United States.

If I had not had the advantages of all of that has been given to me - what would I be like? I realized that in my heart of hearts without those advantages I was capable of doing anything to anybody. Now when you strip that away those benefits, each one of us has to say, isn't there a dark side to my heart, isn't there a dark side?

Marge and I went to see the movie *Clockwork Orange*, has anybody read the book? I taught it in an English class here years ago. It is awful, violent just for sheer pleasure. The young people are going out at night, partly drugged and smashing people up. The movie also showed another side of people that are bland, dozy, a family with nothing. As the story goes - when Alex, the anti-hero, goes to prison they take another fellow in to live with them that is about the same age. Alex the real son leaves and the boy stays -, there is no family structure and what disturbs me is not simply what we saw but what we didn't see.

What the story tells us is that the whole story revolves around a society that formed after let's say a third world war, at least a coming together of all the nations to be a one world situation and they learn a new language and they wipe away all tradition, they annihilate anything that is traditional. The news comes to them by way of one satellite that tells you everything you should know and because there is this group speak going on in the entire society for years upon years the general population becomes stupefied and the young people become violent and that's the way we are in our heart of hearts.

So the solution is not fixing the machinery -- the solution is fixing us and all of us are the same. So, there it is. If you are a student here and are looking for work in the public sector and you want to consider public service in some form or another, then I would say, first of all get to know yourself, know who you are. What is it that makes you tick? What is it that makes you important to yourself? What are your values; not the imprint of society but what are your values? That is number one! Secondly, what is your talent, what is your interest because except for Ian Fleming everybody has to have a talent that they want to use every day. Ian Fleming, wrote all the books in that James Bond is the hero. Ian was a bureaucrat in the British government. He spent his days at the bureaucracy and his nights writing these novels so I say you better follow your interest.

As Robert Frost said, you have to combine your vocation and your avocation and make sure that they match and that they are yours. You have to ask yourself - are you suited to management or are you frontline activity, do you like campaigning, or do you like to manage because if you get into public service you are going to go one way or another. You're going to be on city council or you're going to be in city hall, which is your inclination? Consider the pressure cooker of the place. Decisions moment by moment by moment - you get paper stacked up before you get to your office waiting for you and you are supposed to decide what you are going to read and what to decide and the tax bills are simple compared to some of the others. So you have to be ready for the pressure cooker and finally you have to confront issues from every side.

If you like Ayn Rand and *Atlas Shrugged* then also read *Small is Beautiful*. It is important to get both sides. If you like Smith then you should also read Huxley and get an understanding of what both sides of the street are. Practice looking for the premise rather than the politics. I kind of give this pea-shooter everywhere I go, everything begins with a premise, the assumption that you make on which you build a philosophy, on which you build policy, on which you build politics and it works out that way. The trouble is most of the parties spend most of the time on the politics, some on the policies, very little on the philosophy and almost nothing on the premise and that's why we get into trouble. There are a few more peas in the pod and one is persistence and patience and all of those.

Another story for you - I had gone to work in 1976 as there was a by-election in Toronto in Broadview Greenwood. It was a district which we Tories had not held since Noah came out of the Ark, it was hopeless, it was not ours but another colleague and I said well we better go fly the flag. We went to the campaign office and each of us got a package of material and were matched up with one of the local guys that worked on the campaign. I went with this fellow to the poll that they had given us and distributed all the literature to all the houses along that poll. When we were done we went back to the office, left the residue there and got on the plane and went back to Ottawa. When the election came we were skunked, I mean it was bad. We came in a poor third. Forward now just about twenty years later, there is something going on in the party and I didn't like it. I called headquarters in Ottawa and I said I would like to speak to the national director. They switched me to the national director - I said this is Benno Friesen I've been in this party a long time...he said stop right there --- you and I dropped the poll in Broadview Greenwood in 1976 you don't have to give me your credentials - twenty years later, some things are never lived down.

So I say one of the most important things for us when we get into the political world is not only patience but persistence and the other word for persistence is faithfulness, be there. I can't add two and two but I went to public accounts meetings one after another because they didn't have a quorum and I would

make up the quorum sitting there doing something else because I would ruin the discussion by talking numbers anyway. I would go and make the system work by doing that, and then when I go to caucus they listen to me, not simply because I had something earthshattering to say but because they knew that when it came to the trenches I was there doing it.

So you have to practice looking at the premise and the policy and the politics and make sure that your colleagues can always count on your support and after you have done all that then read Psalm 20 the first verse, *some trust in chariots and some in horses but we will trust in the name of our Lord*. After doing everything that we have, doing it as well as we can, being as faithful as we can, being as informed as we can, being as technically accurate as we can, it is still the Lord's battle and He will honour what we have done. Thank you.

Transcribed from the audio tape of the presentation