

The University of the South
Convocation Remarks
September 16, 2022
Claude O. Pressnell, Jr.

Vice Chancellor Berner, Board of Regents, Board of Trustees, University Faculty, and students. I am deeply humbled by the honor you have bestowed upon me and for allowing me to speak during this auspicious occasion of the Advent Convocation and the Order of the Gown. A special congratulations to the nearly 300 new members of the Order of the Gown!

Before I begin, let me introduce to you my family members who have joined me for today's occasion. First is my mother, Pat Pressnell, my brother Derrel, and then, of course, my lovely wife Dr. Cathy Pressnell. Without the love and support of my family I would not have had the opportunities afforded to me in my life.

President Berner asked me to share with you some life experiences that have shaped my career to this point. I typically shy away from such discussions because I find it a bit uncomfortable and don't want my remarks to come across as some narcissistic ego trip. So, I will leave much of my bio to what you've heard in the introduction and what you can read in the program.

My hope is that hearing some of my story will challenge you to dream broadly about your future. What I intend for you to take away from my life story is that the academic major you are so focused on today, need not restrict you from the riches of other life experiences. Actually, your academic pursuits serve as a gateway to a life full of adventure.

I grew up in a small town in Kansas and was the first in my family to attend university. It was uncharted territory for my family and I am very grateful for their support. My undergraduate degree was in Religious Studies, my masters was in Greek, and doctorate in Higher Education Leadership. During this rather lengthy journey, I do recall my father asking if I was ever going to get a real job! Fortunately, I did, and was able to make him proud.

A piece of advice I received during my academic journey was that wherever you attend the work would be hard, so choose to attend an institution that will position me well for the future and open doors of opportunity. Consequently, I chose Wheaton College for my masters and Vanderbilt University for my doctorate.

Sewanee is also one of the universities of influence! You have chosen well but you still must be aggressive in your studies to maximize your experience here on the mountain. Due to time constraints, you will only be exposed to a small portion of the expertise possessed by the faculty. Let this life of the mind consume you, for this leisurely chapter will pass far too quickly. With unreckoning speed, your life will be filled with obligations such as finding a career, becoming committed to a life-long partner, possibly starting a family, and list grows. You may think you

are busy today, but I suggest you hang-on tight because the chaff of busyness will come upon you from all directions once you leave this place.

So, what you have before you is a person who devoted his academic pursuits largely to the religious thought and ended up in a life of state, federal, and international higher education policy. My daily work is to create and implement strategies that allow Tennessee's 34 private nonprofit campuses to flourish. I do this largely through public policy, leadership development, and institutional collaboration. The policy focus is on providing student financial aid to low and moderate income families to enable their students to attend the college that best fits their academic and social needs.

Internationally, my focus is advising foreign governments on higher education policy mostly in post-conflict regions of the world. The bulk of my time has been spent in the former Yugoslavia, particularly Kosovo, and in Iraq. I'm continuing my work in Iraq but most recently had an opportunity to advise the parliament in Yangon, Myanmar and have had the privilege to serve as a Fulbright Specialist in the Maldives.

During my 35 years in higher education, I've tried to be aware of opportunities that present themselves. Whether it be an international opportunity or a congressional appointment – if it bolstered the work I was doing and was presented as an exciting challenge, I took it. Sure, there are times you need to say 'no' but lean toward 'yes.'

This brings me to today's challenge for all of us. Having worked in the policy world for about 30 years, I have never seen such an unhealthy political environment. The fragility of the American experiment seems quite pronounced. Fractures in our political system seem to be constantly shifting with minimal desire to stabilize the system through civil discourse.

Ross Douthat, in his recent work *Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics*, posits that America's historic problem with religious involvement in politics is when political understanding overtakes *true* religious thought. He provides a brief history of both liberal and conservative failings that occur when misguided by near heretical religious impulses.

Douthat argues that there are those who adhere to a messianic political ideal whose burden of unrealistic hope is borne by the candidates. Essentially, they are looking for a savior who can lead the country to some form of promise land or utopia. This often turns into a misappropriated hope which leads to frustration and comes under attack with labels as socialists, Marxists, or free-spending liberals.

On the other hand, there are those run on a platform of defeating evil. They appeal to the voters' fear. They see the country as in a process of decay and headed for ultimate peril. Everyone who disagrees with them is the enemy, thus creating a fertile ground for conspiracy theories and heightened paranoia.

In both scenarios, partisan politics become the OBJECT of faith. Only a veneer of Christianity remains. Just enough to quote passages to support one's cause and corral the opposition into the "other side." We've quickly moved away from the term 'us,' as in UNITY, which takes far more work and humility to maintain.

This is exacerbated by social media which keeps each other at a comfortable distance allowing users to state unsubstantiated claims and lob harmful insults at each other that would have never been spoken in person. You disagree with me? "Click" - unfriend. It then drives the users deeper into their echo chamber to be refreshed and gain some "pithy quote" to use as ammunition against the perceived enemy.

I don't intend to oversimplify the issue and admit that what I've just described should be debated much further. My brief comments fall short of the time and attention this topic deserves. However, I think that much of what I've laid out is self-evident. Our country is in a difficult place that demands corrective engagement of us all.

We need to come to the rightful conclusion that politics and political systems are not the ultimate reality. We must not have misdirected passions and hopes. We need to place them back in their rightful place.

C.S. Lewis helps correct our thinking in his essay *Learning in War Time*, when he writes, "A [person] may have to die for [their] country, but no [person] must, in any exclusive way, live for [their] country." Life's purpose is found beyond political frameworks.

There are several authors that attempt to outline a pathway forward. Three that I would bring to your attention are Douthat's book *Bad Religion*, Os Guinness' *A Free People's Suicide*, and former Tennessee's Governor Bill Haslam's *Faithful Presence*. These works are written for the public arena, not the academic, but I think they offer thoughtful strategies to be considered and discussed. Let me summarize their conclusions.

Douthat offers the following thoughts. First, be political without being partisan – stay engaged but do so with humility. Second, Christianity should be ecumenical but also confessional – it should be rooted in belief and not subject to self-pleasing narcissistic spirituality. Third, Christianity should be moralistic but also holistic – seeking healing and reconciliation. Finally, Christianity should be oriented toward sanctity and beauty. He argues for "public examples of holiness, and public demonstrations of what the imitation of Christ can mean to a fallen world."

Guinness, unpacks what he calls the "golden triangle" of freedom. First, freedom requires virtue – leaders should be virtuous! Second, virtue requires faith – an agreed upon bedrock of moral certainty that exists outside of oneself. And, finally, faith requires freedom – a fundamental principle of the nation's founding.

Governor Haslam argues for continued political engagement. He writes, "The first important step to having a faithful presence is to actually be present." He argues that once under siege by those

who disagree with us, which inevitably comes, we should not respond with anger, withdrawal, or assimilation. Rather, we should seek and pray for the well-being of those opposed to us and deeply consider the merits of their argument. Haslam also calls for understanding that community is for all, not just those with whom you agree. Next, he reminds the reader of the prophet Micah's challenge (6:8), to act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God. Haslam suggests that change will only occur when all three of Micah's admonitions are present. Finally, he says we are to speak truth but to do so in love.

All three authors write about the need for genuine Christian engagement. I agree. I don't believe our problem is too much Christianity, rather it is too little. It is not possible to confront the person of Jesus Christ and remain the same. He transforms us and renews our minds. All our being is to bend toward reconciliation and love.

Healing always begins with us. As King David reminds us in Psalm 139, we need to allow God to examine our hearts and to remove any hurtful way within us.

It is always worth asking, "what if I am wrong?" Years ago, a dear friend of mine used to remind me that it is hard to be wrong all the time. It is highly likely that we think far too favorably about our own positions and not favorably enough about the positions of our neighbors.

The Apostle Paul writes in the second letter to the Corinthians, that since God compels us toward the ministry of reconciliation, we are to "no longer view anyone from a worldly point of view." C.S. Lewis captures this new view in his essay *Weight of Glory*, when he writes,

There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations [political parties], cultures, arts, civilisations – these are mortal and their life is to ours as a life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit.... This does not mean that we are to be perpetually solemn. We must play. But our merriment must be of that kind ... which exists between people who have, from the outset, taken each other seriously – no flippancy, no superiority, no presumption. And our charity must be a real and costly love, ... Next to the Blessed Sacrament itself, your neighbour is the holiest object presented to your senses.

Please know that those who identify with the Sewanee experience are expected to think deeply and reflect in community on such issues. You are to always be seen as those working toward a redemptive solution to the human dilemma.

This is always the challenge for you and for me and in all places - even amid political debate – we are to be Christ to others. We should always ask ourselves if our demeanor exudes the fruits of the spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Let's regain the "us" as a nation.

Please pray with me as I read the collect for the nation.

Lord God Almighty, you have made all the peoples of the earth for your glory, to serve you in freedom and in peace. Give to the people of our country a zeal for justice and the strength of forbearance, that we may use our liberty in accordance with your gracious will; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.