

McCALLIE

— HONOR TRUTH DUTY —



“Playoffs, Hats, and Joy: A Christmas Message”

Chapel Talk by Head of School Lee Burns '87
Wednesday, December 11, 2024

On the Saturday after Thanksgiving, I settled onto my sofa late in the morning to watch the Tennessee-Vanderbilt football game, scheduled for a noon kickoff.

I don't like to be late or miss things, even to miss what would surely be an uneventful opening kickoff into the end zone, as predictable as senior Elliott Arnold booming his kick deep into the end zone to be fielded by our surehanded equipment manager, Jack Harris, for a touchback.

My favorite comedian, Nate Bartgatze, of recent SNL fame portraying George Washington declaring we were fighting in the Revolutionary War for the freedom to have our own system of confusing weights, measures, and distances, has a great bit about kickoffs. He describes how once, during a kickoff to a game he was watching on TV, he went from his couch to his kitchen, about 30 feet, and by the time he gets to his kitchen, a player had run the kickoff back 100 yards, with 11 opposing players trying to keep him from running at all. Nate notes that he, by comparison, didn't even have an ottoman obstructing his short walk to the kitchen.

Tennessee kicks off, and Vanderbilt returns it for a touchdown. 11 seconds. 7 points. I wish Elliott had kicked off through the end zone.

Three plays later, Tennessee fumbles the ball around their own 20-yard line, Vanderbilt scores shortly thereafter, and it's quickly 14-0 Commodores.

I'm thinking: Nelson Eiselstein is going to be unbearable.

And so is my grief for my Vols blowing an opportunity to make the College Football Playoff.



This Sunday, the 12 teams for the College Football Playoff were announced, including my Tennessee Vols. The playoffs begin on December 20, which will give fans and the media plenty of time to prognosticate, banter, and poke fun at each others' schools. It is in that spirit that I share this message as we approach the Christmas season. And don't worry Chaplain Deitrick, this isn't just about football and my prediction for which of the 12 teams will win it all.



With me I have a hat for each of the 12 schools fighting for dominance in the college football world. They each have strengths and compelling narratives and will fight vigorously. And yet, ultimately, there can only be one champion, one master.

It's fun for me to think about the College Football Playoffs, how the teams will match up, and who is most likely to win. It got me to thinking the other day, though, about a different version of a playoff. *What 12 ideas or experiences have competed to shape my life, my worldview, to make me be me? And which idea is the ultimate victor in my life?*



When we are young, we are largely influenced—even limited—by our parents. We tend to believe what they believe, like what they like, pull for whom they pull. We aim to please them—sometimes to a fault.

I grew up as one of seven children in a Christian home. We said our prayers together as a family after dinner. We went to church most Sundays. I knew most of the Bible stories and the right things to say.

While we are called to honor our parents, and we generally have much to learn from them, we need to develop our own beliefs. Maybe they are the same as your parents, but the main thing is that your beliefs are your own.



My oldest son Arthur is a sophomore at the University of Georgia. He's a huge Bulldog fan. A few weeks ago, we attended the Tennessee-Georgia game in Athens. As his father, I could, out of my love for him, pull for UGA in the playoffs. That would please him.

But I just can't do it. Building a life of pleasing others, or living up to the hopes or pressures of other people, or parroting their beliefs, is not a smart (pun intended) way to live. You can lose too much of yourself or your principles in pleasing others.

So I'm throwing out my UGA hat. Sorry, Arthur. I just can't do it.



Around my teenage years, which I spent as a McCallie student, I encountered the natural desire to be more independent. I didn't enjoy being told what to do or not do. Adam and Eve didn't like that either back in the Garden of Eden as described in Genesis. It's inherent in the human condition to long to do things our own way, on our own, not accountable to anyone...to be our own god. Like Notre Dame refusing to play in a football conference. They are an independent.

And while independence may shield you from some losses (Notre Dame would have at least three losses in the SEC) and offer more freedom, I've found, at several seasons in my life, that independence can be isolating and lonely. We are designed by God for relationships, intimacy, and community.

So I'm throwing out my Fighting Irish hat.



Independence taken to an extreme can be rebellion. It's common, especially during high school and even college years, to rebel against parents, schools, institutions, and values that are more mainstream and traditional. For a while, I marveled at the cynicism of Holden Caulfield in *Catcher in the Rye* and how he belittled social institutions and norms. Yet, over time, I've come to view much of rebellion as a confused phase of attention-seeking, like someone in SEC country being an Ohio State fan. There's no good reason to be a Buckeye fan down here. Like many rebel causes, it doesn't stand up to intellectual scrutiny and discipline (or against an M team clad in blue in a big game).

So I'm throwing out my Ohio State hat.



I enjoyed and appreciated my years as a student at McCallie. I had amazing teachers, coaches, and mentors. Among other things, I soaked in the culture of excellence. It seemed normal and natural to want to achieve at high levels. I craved straight A's and state championships and All-American teams and Ivy League acceptances. I wanted the biggest...the best. Like the University of Texas.

Texas, perhaps more than any state, struggles with oversized ego and pride. In my own quest to achieve and in my failures to do so, I learned that an obsession with success can be intoxicating and addictive, and failure can be crippling and devastating.

So I'm tossing out my Texas hat.

1986 VARSITY TENNIS TEAM



(1st row, left to right): Matthew Warren, David Elliot, David Dethero, Jim Callaway, Kirk Haun, Lee Burns. (2nd row, left to right): Sam Swann, K J. Copeland, Andrew Leach, Kenny Armstrong, Paul Alvarado. (3rd row, left to right): Head Coach David Vining, Calvin Stewart, Parke Morris, Jim Lever, Jim Burns, Keith Evans (assistant).

SMU For part of my sophomore year in college, I worked at a very prestigious law firm in New York City that focused on mergers and acquisitions of large multinational corporations. I was stunned, in a good way, at the pay. Most nights, the firm drove me home in a company limousine. It was a fast and fine life of luxury.



When I was your age, SMU's football team was dubbed the Pony Express. They were a top five national team, but they were surely number one in illegally giving their players cars, money, and the fast life. So free-flowing and egregious was the money that the NCAA gave the football program the death penalty.

While I appreciated the experience and money at the law firm, I worked 80 hours per week and noted that most of the people there, though making enormous amounts of money, were largely unhappy by their own admission. Money and the fast life don't necessarily bring fulfillment and happiness.

So I'm throwing out my SMU hat.

“And yet life is sometimes hard and unhappy and unfair, and certainly beyond our control. We all have moments or even seasons of disappointment, devastation, shock, and pain. And if your life is built primarily on happiness, it may crumble when the howling and harsh winds and rain come.

So I'm throwing out my Penn State hat.”



Speaking of happiness, do you know where Penn State is located? They're in Happy Valley, Pennsylvania. In our society today, the most common desire that individuals have for themselves, and that parents have for their children, is to be happy.

And how do we typically get this happiness? By disproportionately marshaling our energy, focus, and resources to being comfortable, having an easy life, eating well, traveling widely, having a nice home (or two), getting the right job, being happily married with healthy and flourishing children. It's the American dream...the carefully curated stories we tell, post, and share, whether true or not.

And yet life is sometimes hard and unhappy and unfair, and certainly beyond our control. We all have moments or even seasons of disappointment, devastation, shock, and pain. And if your life is built primarily on happiness, it may crumble when the howling and harsh winds and rain come.

So I'm throwing out my Penn State hat.



I don't know much about Boise State, except that they play on a blue field in Idaho. I don't ever watch them play. I don't really ever think about them. In my arrogance, I don't think they belong in the playoff.

I've spent too much of my life focused on me and my little comfortable and familiar corner of the world—my SEC—even though the Bible tells us that we are all created in the image of God and that we are to spread His love, hope, and Word to all peoples and all nations in the fabulously diverse world He created, even to far-away people playing football on blue fields.



Since the Boise State hat represents my own narrow mindedness and my own selfishness, I'm tossing it out.



It's natural to feel guilt over what we don't do that we should, as well as the things we say and do that we should not. And while we rightly should feel that guilt, we should not let that devolve into intractable shame and doom.

The Bible tells us about the evil one—sometimes called the Devil or Satan. While our conceptions of the Devil may be with a flaming pitchfork to spear us, he is much more subtle. He is more likely to trick us with half-truths and lies, to present a good thing as an ultimate thing, to distract us from God, to convince us that we should be so full of shame that God could never love us or forgive us.

I reject the lies of the Devil, so I reject the Arizona State Sun Devils and throw out their hat.



Clemson plays in Death Valley. That sounds pretty intimidating. And they've won a couple of national championships, but their fear factor is diminished by virtue of two of the nicest guys—Dabo Sweeney and David Vining—being associated with the university.

“In the darkest and most fearful chapters of my life, each time God has shown up and revealed His love and light in beautiful and unexpected ways. He tells us over and over to fear not and that He is always there with us, even as we walk through the valley of the shadow of death.”

Nonetheless, so many of us live in fear. Or in the shadows...or in the shadow of the valley of death. We can be afraid to examine who we really are—the parts of ourselves and our stories we don't like, the mistakes we make, the patterns we can't seem to break. We fear what's really in our hearts, the future, and being unknown and unloved and all alone.

In the darkest and most fearful chapters of my life, each time God has shown up and revealed His love and light in beautiful and unexpected ways. He tells us over and over to fear not and that He is always there with us, even as we walk through the valley of the shadow of death.

I reject a life of fear, so I throw out the Clemson hat.

O The Oregon Ducks are the number one seed. Their offense is smart, fast-paced, and sophisticated. Their uniforms are snazzy, glitzy, and different for each game. They exude a very modern vibe and approach compared to traditional football teams.

In an era sometimes described as post-modern, it's common to embrace that which is sophisticated and scientific as the only reality. It's common to think that there are as many truths as there are Oregon uniforms. It's common to think all that matters is being smart and sophisticated.



There are some people who would say that faith is a quaint and simplistic idea for simple and unsophisticated people. To the contrary, I say that the more a person studies the Bible, and science, and history, and human nature, and oneself, the greater the credibility of the Bible, and the more one sees ultimate Truth rather than personal, relative truth.

I don't like the modern vibe of the Oregon Ducks and their multiple uniforms, so I'm tossing out their hat.

Ψ While Oregon is new school glitz, Indiana is old fashioned. Simple uniforms. Basic style. Focus on fundamentals.

Their nickname, the Hoosiers, is also traditional and quaint. It means a person who is friendly and hospitable. I like that. It's important to be well-behaved, kind, and respectful.

I was raised in a Hoosier-like family and attended a Hoosier-like school. I can do polite and good behavior pretty well. So can you. That's a good thing.

And yet I can think that my own goodness and rule-following politeness is what God most wants from me...and what will secure His favor and my salvation. Over time, I've learned to reject my own moralism, kindness, and hospitality as the most important part of me.

So I'm throwing out the Indiana Hoosiers hat.

T So we are down to one: the Tennessee Vols.

My passion and love for the Vols goes back to my childhood, when my parents got season tickets when I was eight. As a family, we'd drive up to Knoxville for the games. Of course I enjoyed watching the games, but what I really loved was the family time together. I have so many strong and warm memories and emotions tied up with UT football. They are forever entrenched in my heart.



So my heart is with Tennessee. And of course we follow our hearts. That's been a message delivered thousands of times at schools and graduation ceremonies all over the country. Follow your heart.

And yet, surprising to most people, the Bible cautions us about our hearts, even telling us that the heart about all things is deceitful, even to ourselves.

While our heart can be filled with love, compassion, and so forth, it can also be prideful, greedy, lustful, and selfish. It is both noble and infected with sin, so a pure devotion to the desires of one's heart is folly.

I know that, even in my sometimes good and noble actions, I have mixed motives, hypocrisy—a shadow and selfish agenda.

So, with hesitation and sadness, I'm throwing out even my Tennessee hat.

So who's left?

No one.

Just as no team remains, can any worldly narrative truly stand and endure as the proper and true master to shape our lives?

This month, Christians around the world instead embrace a supernatural story...not a worldly one, but a divine one. They celebrate the birth of Jesus, whom they believe to be the Son of God, sent on a loving rescue mission to save undeserving, helpless sinners and reconcile them to God.

It's a bold, even amazing claim. I understand why lots of people find it implausible, if not impossible. I especially understand that teenagers, in a developmental phase of independence and skepticism, would naturally doubt, even be cynical. And yet billions of people for over two thousand years have believed, professed their faith in Jesus, and experienced transformed lives.

How does that happen?

How do people from a multitude of countries and cultures, living in different eras, with radically different life experiences, both the well educated and the simple, shepherds and farmers, astrophysicists and doctors, all come to belief?

The Bible tells us that the Holy Spirit, one part of the Trinity of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, enables it, opening our hearts and minds to it.

“How do people from a multitude of countries and cultures, living in different eras, with radically different life experiences, both the well educated and the simple, shepherds and farmers, astrophysicists and doctors, all come to belief?”

“I kept putting on and taking off hats—good hats—looking for the best team, the best idea to shape my life. But over time I took off all the hats—even the ones that looked good and fit well and that other people wore, too. We sometimes have to lose, dismiss, or take off good things, even to the point of having nothing left, to get to the best, the ultimate.”

While the work of the Holy Spirit may be common, the circumstances vary by person and can be multifaceted.

For me, my story, journey, and decision to believe was having knowledge, a foundation, of the key messages of the Bible and, over time, reflecting on them and deepening my understanding of them, making them my own, and committing myself to them. As my life has progressed, I’ve flirted with, wrestled with, and dismissed competing narratives: that I’d be fulfilled if I were successful, got into the right schools, and had the right job and relationships. That I just need to be good. That Christianity is about following rules. That I can manufacture ultimate happiness. That money is supreme. That I’m too smart or sophisticated or cool for faith.

I found each competing narrative to be seductive and seemingly logical, but ultimately to be flawed and frail and unfulfilling.

I kept putting on and taking off hats—good hats—looking for the best team, the best idea to shape my life. But over time I took off all the hats—even the ones that looked good and fit well and that other people wore, too. We sometimes have to lose, dismiss, or take off good things, even to the point of having nothing left, to get to the best, the ultimate.

And the best was realizing that God knows me perfectly, including my every flaw and sin, and that He still loves me anyway and perfectly, loves me no matter what, no matter my mess-ups, and loves me so much that He’d send and sacrifice His Son for my salvation. Realizing and reflecting on that, remembering that regularly, especially in reading it throughout the Bible, makes a remarkable, transformational difference.

It has especially made a difference in the difficult moments or seasons of my life. I have most intimately known and felt God’s presence and love during those dark times we all face. He has most tenderly filled me with hope when I most needed help. Despite the stresses of life, my anxieties softened and my fears faded. Paths and purposes were made clear amidst chaos and confusion. Peace pervaded and permeated.

With trust in God, not in myself, my life became different. Joy. Peace. Relief. Freedom. Gratitude. It’s not perfect, far from it in fact, but it’s different, better, transformed.

It’s easy and common to build our lives on the wrong things—on false and frail ideas, on the fashionable hats of flawed teams—even if they look smart and strong.

What hats do you wear? Who are your teams? Your master? Who competes to shape your life? Where do you find your direction, your strength?

We boys and men are conditioned to think of strength as self reliance. Independence. Be a self-made man. Be successful. Be stoic.

The Christmas story, though, reminds us that the greatest strength comes from vulnerability, from surrender. God sent Jesus as a vulnerable and helpless baby, born to a poor young mother in a dirty barn on a cold night.

His invitation to us is to vulnerability and surrender. He calls us to be vulnerable in acknowledging we are sinners. We are lost. We are helpless. We don't deserve His love. We can't save ourselves. We can't win on our own.

He calls us to surrender. To give up on our quest to prove ourselves, to earn His love. To surrender our performances and pride, our egos and idols. To surrender our worries and anxieties and fears.

It is in giving up that we get, that we receive, a gift we could never gain on our own. Grace is that gift which we do not deserve. We simply receive it, with humility and awe and gratitude. In the ultimate act of grace, God sent His Son that we might know Him, receive Him, be forgiven, be reconciled to God, be resurrected, and experience the blessings, joy, and peace that He offers us, both now and forever.

He sent His love and joy into the world.

Let us rejoice.

I invite you to sing "Joy to the World."

"The Christmas story, though, reminds us that the greatest strength comes from vulnerability, from surrender. God sent Jesus as a vulnerable and helpless baby, born to a poor young mother in a dirty barn on a cold night. "

