



making God's love visible in downtown Memphis

A New Heart and a New Spirit
Easter Vigil, Year B, Ezekiel 36:24-28
March 30, 2024
The Rev. Paul McLain

In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Last Sunday night, I talked with a parishioner about how we are more interested in the women's than the men's side of the NCAA Basketball Tournament. That seems to be the case throughout the nation, with everyone eager to watch amazing star players like Caitlyn Clark of Iowa and brilliant, energetic coaches like Dawn Staley of South Carolina. This was not always the case. Until the 1970's, women's basketball players and coaches were neglected on college campuses and by the media. Pat Summitt changed all that.

She became head coach of the University of Tennessee women's basketball team in 1974 at age 22, making a whopping stipend of \$250 a month. Pat personally washed the players' uniforms that they bought by having a doughnut sale. She drove the van and swept the floor of the dilapidated old gym where fifty-three people came to watch them play their season opener.

From those humble beginnings, Pat built a women's basketball program that won eight national championships. She accomplished much of this through her sheer will and toughness. But over time, in part due to the losses in her life, Pat became a more complete human being as her heart became more vulnerable and open.

In our scripture reading from Ezekiel, God promises to bring the people out of exile - to gather them from the scattered nations after they have been dispersed across the Babylonian Empire following the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple. During their time in exile, the lives of the Hebrew people had become cold and transactional, much like the stone idols they had come to worship as they assimilated in these new lands.

God promises to sprinkle clean water upon them, and cleanse them from the idols they had served. As water rushes over a rock, it not only cleanses it, it smooths out

its rough, jagged edges over time. The currents of the water slowly open up tiny crevices in the rock for new life to find safe spaces in which to be born.

Then God promises to put within the people 'a new heart' and 'a new spirit.' God says, 'I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.' It is only with this new heart and new spirit that we can be truly open to seeing God and others through eyes of gratitude, humility, and gentleness.

Pat Summit grew up on a farm in tiny Henrietta, Tennessee, with a stern father, a hard-working mother, three older brothers, and a baby sister. After they completed all their chores around the farm, Pat played basketball with her brothers on an iron rim mounted in the hayloft. The boys played hard, throwing their fists and elbows, while saying to Pat, 'Don't you cry, girl. I better not see you cry.' Those words stayed with her as she developed her legendary toughness, work ethic, and competitive spirit. Even after knee surgery from a torn ACL, Pat played and led the U.S. Olympic team to a silver medal in the 1976 Montreal Games.

One of our parishioners, Bill Haltom, wrote a book about how Pat and others courageously testified and worked to change the rules for women's high school basketball. Before, Tennessee high school girls had played six-on-six, in which three offensive players stayed on half the court, and three defensive players on the other half. Defenders could spend their entire careers without taking a shot. Pat testified about the difficult physical and mental transition this caused for players as they moved to the college level. She went to high schools across the state to meet with coaches, players, and parents to drum up support for this rule change. At long last in 1979, girls in Tennessee could cross the half-court line.

While Pat led the Lady Vols basketball team to 1,098 victories, she also experienced some significant losses along the way. She was diagnosed with a heart rhythm problem and later with rheumatoid arthritis. Pat had four miscarriages before giving birth to the love of her life, her son Tyler. She went through a painful divorce. And then, Pat and those around her began to notice she was having trouble remembering things. She was eventually diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. Her team, her assistant coaches, and the administration, who had embraced Pat through all the losses in her life, also gave her the support and grace to continue as head coach for as long as she wanted.

When she made the decision that it was time to step down, they then made her head coach emeritus and she continued to contribute to the program. They also

named the basketball court 'The Summitt' in her honor. Pat said her greatest accomplishment was not the eight national championships. It was the fact that every one of the women on her teams graduated – every one of them received an education and was given opportunities for a better life, whether it included basketball or not.

In her final years as coach, Pat learned to be a little more mellow and a lot more vulnerable with her players. She discovered how much she could learn from them. She learned how much she needed them. Over time, a new heart and a new spirit was placed in her. She never lost her toughness that served her and all around her so well. But she became more deeply caring and empathetic. What became more important than winning games were the lasting relationships she built with players and fellow coaches. They became a close-knit community in which they shared unconditional love.

Earlier tonight, we baptized two beautiful children – Sarah and Julien. As the sprinkling water washed over them, their journey in Christian community began. They are given new vulnerable hearts and new open, embracing spirits. As we renewed our baptismal covenant alongside them, new life is also given to our collective heart and spirit. We welcome Julien and Sarah into a baptized community in which we look out for each other through the eyes of Jesus, especially keeping an eye out for those who are vulnerable and hurting.

Eleven months after being diagnosed with Alzheimer's, Pat Summitt said to a friend, 'Sometimes I wish God hadn't given me so many issues.' The friend said, 'What kind of issues?' Pat said, 'Personal issues.' The friend asked, 'Can you tell me about them?' Pat thought for a moment and said, 'I guess they made me who I am. I guess they made me better. One thing I've learned.' The friend said, 'What?' Pat said, 'How powerful God is.

For Pat, it was the losses in her life that became the water that rushed over her, smoothing her jagged edges, and giving space for new life to emerge. Her losses were springboards to shared vulnerability and kindness. Through his resurrection, Jesus raises us all up to the summitt, where we feel and give his embracing love.
Amen.