

I Wish Someone Had Told Me That – Or, Did They?

Baccalaureate Sunday

Text: Romans 8:31,39

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

This morning I want to speak to you graduates. These remarks are for you, but the congregation is invited to listen in because there may be a thing or two for them, as well. In this year 2000, when you get a diploma, I received a Medicare card, and that may qualify me as a sage. Having lived this long, I have acquired some wisdom, and I thought there were some things I would like to share with you. In fact, they are the things that I wish someone had told me - or, did they? There are some things that I wish that someone had told me as I was growing up, some things that could have saved me some anxiety and some mistakes, some things I wish I had known.

I wish someone had told me that - or, did they? Maybe they did, because you don't always listen, nor did I, and sometimes the wisdom that flows just rolls off your back, and later on, maybe, this conversation will come into focus. I have no illusion that just another sermon is going to change your life, but I didn't really think you wanted another sermon, either, so I thought I'd just tell you some things that I wish somebody had told me, or if they did, I wish I had caught on to.

At this commencement season, I am aware of the fact that these young people and countless others across the country receive all kinds of encouragement and challenge, in motivational speeches we'll hear from Presidents and Generals and significant people who will address all kinds of graduating classes and all phases of education in these days. We'll get little snippets on the television news and, by and large, they will be words of encouragement; they will be words of motivation to achieve, to pursue your goals, to pursue your dreams and to work hard and to accept the challenge of life, and that's good, because it is true that you will kind of slide through if you can, but you also do respond to challenge when it is significant and meaningful. So, I think all of that is good, but I also had the strong feeling as I contemplated Baccalaureate Sunday that we do put a lot of pressure on our graduates. As parents and as pastors and as teachers, we create a lot of pressure for them and we are not always totally honest with the way life really is. There are some things we don't tell you, and I thought that this morning I would

like to tell you some things that I wish that I had understood. It's a little different from the voices you're going to hear at this time of graduation. I hope you get a lot of challenge, a lot of encouragement. I hope you are stirred and motivated, but this is going to be an alternative voice.

First of all, what I wish someone had said to me is: Relax a little bit and take time to live, and don't let the pressure squeeze you into a mold, meeting everybody else's expectations, the expectations of all the people in your life who are important and society in general. Take some time to live. Have a bit of humor about your life. Relax a little bit; let up a little bit.

I suppose there's not another church in the country that would ever print that poem on the front of its liturgy by Jenny Joseph about wearing purple, but the poet suggests that when she gets old, she's going to wear purple, she's going to do all kinds of outrageous things, all kinds of silly things, all kinds of foolish things. And the only reason that poem sells, the only reason we read it and we smile at it is because in all of us we spend an awful lot of time toeing the mark, living up to expectations, doing the thing that is wise and respectable and responsible and in all of us there's a little something that needs to break out of that once in a while. If the poet is going to wear purple and be outrageous when she's old, she does suggest that maybe she ought to start practicing so it wouldn't be such a shock when she got old, and it occurred to me that we're not always honest with our children and our youth. We push pretty hard and our society creates a lot of pressure on young people. I think they're working very hard. I'm very impressed with what our young people are doing these days and I think it even goes farther than that. There are probably a few Baby Boomer parents that need to hear what I'm going to say this morning, also, and that is that we can get into a mode of drivenness about achieving and succeeding. We are bombarded by the media with the fact that we ought to be consumers, we ought to purchase and possess and acquire, and there is a groundswell in our society, I sense, that it's not easy to live up to, not easy to meet the expectations, and we start with young people like this and we simply try to push them and not say to them, "Once in a while it's okay to wear purple and to dance in the rain and to do something foolish, just for the sake of it, because it's a part of living and, God knows, it's not easy and you're going to have to be responsible and work hard and do all of that which you have been encouraged to do by the many voices that you have heard." That is all good, but hear me this morning: Don't be driven. Learn to relax. Learn to live fully and let that whole beautiful person you are come to blossom.

There is another thing I want to say I wish someone had told me: Don't expect that you are going to acquire Truth with a capital T. Don't ever expect that, in whatever field you enter or whatever kind of life you lead, you are going to have Truth, absolute Truth in your possession, because, being human, that is impossible, and I wish someone had told me that because I was trying to nail it down, to get it right, to have all the ducks in line. I thought that I could come to a possession of the Truth and stand in the Truth. I wish somebody had told me that

is not possible. It is not possible because of the nature of our human experience. We are people in process. We are a part of a cosmic process. We are a part of an evolving process with a new emerging reality all of the time and, for God's sake, it is 15 billion years already and who knows where it's going, and if we are creatures in process, if we are people on the way, as we certainly are, then we do not possess absolute Truth. That means that we ought to live with an open mind for expanding knowledge and humility before the things we don't know.

Let me give you an example. I mentioned a couple of weeks ago that I was invited to be a part of the Diversity Day at Grand Haven High School, and it was a stellar event in which some of you were exposed to the diversity of race, culture, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion. It was exactly the kind of thing that you should be exposed to because you are entering a world that is full of diversity and diversity comes closer to home all the time. I mention this as an illustration because in the local newspaper we're carrying on a battle of words about the fact that that should not have been done and, of course, the sticking point is the question of sexual orientation. Some are saying these young people should not be exposed to the fact that sexual orientation is a given of our human nature. The scientists are studying it and all the information is not in. It's certainly obvious to anybody who has an open mind at all that sexual orientation is a part of the constitution of the human being and it is as diverse as are people, and yet you would think by reading the newspaper that you could quote a Bible verse that seems to condemn a same-sex union and that God has spoken and that's all there is to it! That really is not the case at all.

The problem, you see, is that this Bible is used for some kind of absolute rulebook that has information in it rather than recognizing that this book is an ancient book, a marvelous book of the story of the spiritual experience of people, the people of Israel and the people who followed Jesus as a record of their experience, their encounter with God, their devotion to God. Instead of recognizing that, it becomes a kind of moral guidance book with rules in it. Now, the Bible says a lot about your sexuality. It says it to all of us, no matter what our orientation may be. It says be faithful and responsible in the exercise of this wonderful gift. But, the questions that we are aware of in our day about sexual orientation weren't even in the purview of this book. It doesn't address it at all! Of course, there were abusive sexual practices then and they were condemned and there is abuse of sexuality today and it should be condemned. That has nothing to do with whether a person is homosexual or heterosexual or somewhere in-between, and to refuse to know that, to admit that, is simply to close your mind to what is obvious to all of us. So, one would live in ignorance, and one living in ignorance could become arrogant, and when ignorance and arrogance combine, the potential for violence is there. This is not a sermon about sexual orientation. Don't forget my point: You are never going to have absolute Truth with a capital T. I use the other only as an illustration of the disruption and the disharmony and the alienation and the violence that can occur when people think they have the absolute Truth spoken by God rather than recognizing that we are people on the

way, but that knowledge is expanding and we must be open to new knowledge, and then change our mind where necessary, but always be humble because the capital T Truth is God's, never the possession of the human. Dear God, I wish someone had told me that.

There is another thing somewhat related and that is that life isn't neat. It is complex and full of ambiguity. It is not simple to find your way. It is not easy to be human. It is full of questions and if we're honest it is full of struggle and wrestling within, and I use as an example of this my hero, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was executed by the Nazis in 1945 just before the camp where he was incarcerated was liberated. Bonhoeffer was a pastor and a theologian and he was really in his heart a pacifist. He really believed that to follow Jesus was to be non-violent. But, he was in that situation of the rise of Hitler and Nazism, and he recognized that if Nazism were to prevail, Western civilization would be lost, and so Bonhoeffer as a pacifist made a decision to join a conspiracy to kill Hitler. Now, do you see the conflict? I'm a pacifist; I don't believe in violence and now I join a conspiracy to kill the head of state, which is treason as well as murder. Can't you see the conflict? Can you not see that this man wrestled within himself and he has this strong conviction about being non-violent and yet he sees what he has to do. He has to act. In the human arena, you are going to have to act and you are not always going to know that it is exactly this or that; you are going to have to act with limited knowledge and limited insight and sometimes you are going to make a mistake and you are going to do something wrong, because life is difficult and life is complex and life is full of ambiguity, and you have to act without knowing everything, and you cannot know everything, but you have to follow your conscience and follow your heart and do what you think you have to do, knowing that it is a judgment call. Read Bonhoeffer's poem in the back of the liturgy, "Who Am I?" This brilliant, deeply spiritual person -was he cock-sure, self-righteous? Not at all. He said, "Who am I?" Those in the prison whose life he lighted up because he led them in prayers and worship, they admired him and respected him. He was a fragrant presence there, but he said, "They think of me that way, but who am I? Am I that, or am I what I feel inside me, with all the struggle and all the distress and all the turmoil in my soul. Am I a hypocrite? Am I one thing one day, one thing another day?" And finally, "Thou knowest, O God, I am Thine!"

That statement came out of the cauldron, that came out of struggle, because life is not easy. The corners are not neat; loose ends are not all tied up and you are going to have to live with that.

That brings me to a final word about God. I put some things in the liturgy, in the insert by St. Augustine, Thomas Merton, Elizabeth Barrett Browning. I wish somebody had told me that God was in everything and present to me in every moment, in every experience. Don't get me wrong - I had a deeply sensitive and devoted home and church and I am grateful for that, but what I am saying is the impression of God I had was like a super-policeman up there keeping records.

Even St. Paul said that we come into this world at enmity with God. I felt there was an adversarial relationship with God and that if I didn't keep in the tracks pretty well I would incur guilt and then I'd be alienated from God and it seemed to me that there was an awful lot of that in my nurture, my growing up. I don't know how to tell you something different, except that I don't know how important God is to you right now, but God will become important to you and when that moment comes, I want you to know that it's the God of Hosea, the Hebrew prophet who spoke about Israel and Israel's rebellion and disobedience and all of that, even though God had tenderly nurtured them and cared for them, and in this very human presentation of God, the prophet speaks of God as being angry with them. Then, however, the prophet has this deep, deep insight, for he puts these words in God's mouth:

How can I give you up, o Israel? How can I give you up?
I should give you up, but how should I give you up?
I can't give you up because I love you.

The cosmic lover. I'll never give you up. I can't give you up. I'll never abandon you. I don't care where your road takes you, what experiences you have, remember Hosea's God, because Hosea got it right in the midst of a lot of other stuff where he spoke of the God who is a lover who will never let you go and is as present to you as your breath is, in some burning bush or flaming sunset or in some human relationship in which you find yourself made whole. In all of that, God is. God is the God that Paul pictures in the 8th chapter of Romans who is for you. If God is for us, who can be against us? And then he gives us that picture which you hadn't ought to literalize, but the picture of Jesus who dies crucified, risen, ascended, and sitting at the throne of God and making intercession for us. In other words, you have an advocate at the throne of power of the universe. That's the picture; that's the image. But the idea of it is that there is something in the heart of things that is for you, for *you*, on your side, that will never let you go. Nothing can ever separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. I don't care how ambiguous your situation, how poor your judgment, what wrong path you may take, how much you stand in confusion before all of the options that hit you in your life, God is *with* you, will be with you, will *never* let you go.

I sort of knew that, but God wasn't so user-friendly for me, and I want you to know there is no adversarial relationship between you and the Creator of the heavens and the earth, and so relax a bit, open your mind to truth wherever you find it, act in your life according to your vision and your values, in the midst of the ambiguity in which you don't always know the answers, and love God, love God, because you are loved of God, and that will never change and that's the greatest thing in the world. God bless you.