

“Things I Wish I Had Known”

Genesis 3:8-15; II Corinthians 4:13-5:1; Mark 3:20-35

The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens
Senior Minister

June 9, 2024

From the Pulpit

The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
444 East Broad Street, Columbus, OH 43215

Phone: 614.228.1741 Fax: 614.461.1741

Email: home@first-church.org

Website: <http://www.first-church.org>

“Things I Wish I Had Known”

Genesis 3:8-15; II Corinthians 4:13-5:1; Mark 3:20-35

A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Pentecost 3, June 9, 2024, dedicated to all the teachers of First Church for 2023-2024, to all the graduates of 2024 from high school and college and always to the glory of God!

Genesis 3 speaks of the struggle in the Garden between humans a serpent and God. It also deals with the importance of truth-telling because it is Adam blaming Eve and lying to God that gets both of them tossed out of the Garden of Eden. II Corinthians 4 deals with explicitly with the contrast between appearance and reality. The final verse of the reading in 5:1 recalls that contrast – as the earthly tent is replaced by the building from God, not built with human hands. It is God’s vision and God’s victory which prevails. Mark’s lesson draws attention to the irony that those who are supposed to be “insiders” do not in fact know who Jesus is. His own family, along with the religious scribes (like the theologians of the day), conclude that he is gripped by some evil power. If you have been following Mark, since the beginning, you know that the insiders are mistaken. They are not what they seem. They stand outside the circle of understanding.

Lying to cover-up mistakes, grasping the contrast between reality and appearances, between earthly “things” and heavenly houses, and completely misunderstanding your own family member and throwing him or her under the bus “as gripped by evil” are all tasty texts for digging deeper into the understanding of faith and life in relation to scripture.

And they are – but today, with teens, teachers and graduates present, I would like to name a few things that I wish I knew when I was 18 years old and headed out into the world. So, “A Few Things I Wish I Knew” is my gift to you for graduation and for your future life and dreams.

+++++

*Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock, and our salvation.
Amen.*

+++++

I have been writing down things I wish I knew when I was younger, and I want to share them with you today. They may be things you already know. That would not surprise me. You are very smart and advanced. I have been watching you grow up all your lives and I know you are brilliant in so many ways. I have not ranked these or placed them in any particular order. Some are only short. They speak for themselves. Let me share the things I wish I knew with you.

I wish I had known that it is alright to make mistakes and to fail at something. When we stumble and fall, we often learn from our mistakes and failures more deeply than the things we do easily and well.

I wish I had known that it is ok to ask for help, and that therapy is an incredible gift to yourself. When I young I used to think that counselors and therapists are where people go who can't do things by themselves. Now I know, asking for help is important in all parts of life and living.

I wish I had known that forgiveness sets you free. It keeps you from hanging onto what was never meant to be so you can live up to what was destined to be.

I wish I had known that regardless of our accomplishments, we're all human, fallible and breakable – every single one of us. SO when you make mistakes, when you fail at something or when you crack, don't fall apart.

I wish I'd known that vulnerability, authenticity, and truth-telling lead to better connections between people. It is often hard to start down the path of vulnerability, authenticity and truth-telling, but once you are walking and talking that path, things get better.

I wish I'd known that “big moments” make up the smallest fraction of our lives. It is the “small moments,” the everyday things that make up most of our minutes, hours and days. If all we're doing is waiting for the really big moments, we don't value and appreciate the small ones. And even on the big days, and in the big games or events, it is the small moments that matter most.

I wish I had known that life doesn't go according to your plan and when that happens it ends up being the best thing that ever happened to you.

I wish I'd known how lucky I was to have parents that care so much, even when we didn't see eye to eye about things. If I had known that a lot more hours and days of my life would have been spent in their arms and close by them.

I wish I'd known that good fortune comes disguised as bad fortune – that there are always new beginnings that come out of our clunky and unfortunate endings.

I wish I had known to return and say “thank you” to the people who guided my life while they were still alive, rather than crying about not speaking to them or writing them after they were dead and gone. A visit to a home, a visit by phone is always better than a visit to a grave or a lament shared at a memorial service. Live a life of gratitude. Say thank you to people now. Don't wait.

I wish I'd known that the only person worth competing against is the previous version of myself. “Personal bests” in any event or sport are what matters. For example, I ran the two-mile in track in High School. I didn't like going in a circle eight times. My teammate was the state champ in Pennsylvania. His goal was always to lap me in the race. Mine was to not be lapped. I didn't know that then, but that was okay. It is okay to get lapped by the best!

I wish I had known to write down all the things I learned from people who taught me. If I had done that I wouldn't be 66 ½ delivering this sermon to you. I would have published a huge book of brilliant things I learned from all of you and others. Write that down.

I wish I'd known that it makes no sense to follow the advice of people who won't live with the consequences of your choices. In other words, follow your heart and your own dreams – don't let others try to tell you what your dream should be.

I wish I'd known that there are some questions that you'll never have answers to, no matter how hard you try to find them.

I wish I had known that our losses in life liberate us from the life we live so we can pursue the life we are destined to live.

I wish I had known that it is better to carry and use a compass rather than a map. When I went on sabbatical in 2010, Sandy Bennett sent me out with a compass and said, “Go where you have never gone before and may God guide you. This compass will take you out and bring you home.” That was the best advice I ever heard for exploring this world.

I wish I would have known that just because everyone else thinks something is true doesn't make it true. The majority isn't always right. The creative, unconventional, and crazy ideas in this world sometimes shine through, but it can be scary being the one with that idea – and feeling all alone.

I wish I had known that first impressions do matter. I would have cleaned up better more often – at least combed my hair. But your posture, eye contact, handshake and more all matter. How you present yourself matters. Just carry yourself well. It can only help you.

I wish I had known not to make assumptions about people – I was probably wrong most of time. If you don't believe this one, watch “Home Alone” again or for the first time. Write that down.

I wish I had known that our families matter immensely, but family members can be wrong and make mistakes – because even though they are our families, they human beings – and therefore fallible.

I wish I had known to make my weaknesses and insecurities my strengths. If I had known this, I would have stepped toward and into things I fled and abandoned.

I wish I had known not to hang around people who didn't care about me (or themselves) and dragged me down instead of hanging out with people who cared about me and lifted me up – spiritually, and emotionally and interpersonally.

I wish I had known how easy it is to make someone's day with a smile, a kind greeting, an unexpected gift, and a hug. You can cheer someone up by looking into their eyes, smiling and saying "hello." If someone is sitting alone, go sit with them. You might make a friend for the moment or a friend for life.

I wish I had known that it is really okay to be different. I would have taken the less travelled roads more often. I would have followed some of my craziest dreams. I would learned to fly, to do ballet, to sing in a choir. But, I didn't because my friends laughed at me when I talked about those things, so I walked away. I wish I had taken the road less travelled. The most fun I ever had was working at a camp for young people with developmental disabilities. I wish I had done that sooner and more often.

I wish I would have known how to actively listen. I love talking (as you know) – but so do other people. I would have listened sooner and better if I had practiced active listening at an earlier age. So, ask questions and make sure you spend at least 60-70% of the time listening with 30-40% talking. Everyone is eager to get their share in a conversation, so let the other person have "airtime." Also remember that people love hearing their own name. It is the sweetest sound in the world, so remember everyone's names. It can take practice, but you can do it.

I wish I would have learned earlier in life to not regret things that have already occurred. You learn from the majority of them so you can avoid them again in the future, don't linger on the past.

I wish I would have learned earlier to never burn bridges. Always try to patch things up because you never know how your paths may cross again and when you will end up crossing that same bridge with the same people.

I wish I would have learned that Life can change at any second and so can you. Get used to change and embrace it. Seek change. Sometimes you don't realize it, but your environment is limiting you.

I wish I would have learned earlier how to Expand my "comfort zone" whenever possible. You can gradually expose yourself one step at a time until you're ready to take on whatever it is that scares you. Things seem a lot less traumatic when you take them in pieces instead of tackling the whole beast all at once.

I wish I had known to trust in God in all things. I wish I would have known to turn to prayer more often and more consistently – every day, several times a day rather than in a panic or only in distress. I wish I knew the presence of the Holy Spirit earlier in my life and trusted the Spirit to guide me through rough times.

I wish I would have given my life to Jesus sooner. He truly is my inspiration and daily delight. He is everything I wish I could be – and seek to follow him more closely – many times falling short, but always getting back to it the day.

Never stop learning. Everyone here and in your life has something to teach you. I know that because I have learned something from

everyone here and everyone in my life. May God guide your steps now always. And always know – now and forever - I love you. Amen.

**I was inspired by the writings of Stephen Nguyen, and Julian Lonescu and Darius Foroux as they shared their insights on learning on life's journey.*