

“Celebrate!”

Delivered to the UU Church of Roanoke on Sunday,
February 15, 2026 by the Rev. Jen Raffensperger

“And to boot,
there are, on this planet alone, something like two
million naturally occurring sweet things,
some with names so generous as to kick
the steel from my knees: agave, persimmon,
stick ball, the purple okra I bought for two bucks
at the market. Think of that. The long night,
the skeleton in the mirror, the man behind me
on the bus taking notes, yeah, yeah.
But look; my niece is running through a field
calling my name. My neighbor sings like an angel
and at the end of my block is a basketball court.
I remember. My color's green. I'm [spring](#).”

Everyone! I'd like you to think for a moment about sweet
things, some of the two million naturally occurring ones -
whether their names feel generous to you or not. Okay. Do
you have a sweet thing in mind! Let's share! I'm going to
count to three, and then we're all going to speak our sweet
thing into the room! Ready? One...two...three!

[cacophony]

Okay, that was awesome. But the problem is, it's hard to hear everyone's sweet thing when we all talk at the same time. I'd love to hear some more of them. Hrm. Let's see.

Can I get some volunteers, please? Anyone who is willing to come up here and be part of a little group, and to share your sweet thing?

Great!

Volunteers, thank you. Could y'all arrange yourselves in a circle up here? Thank you! Now, please take a minute to look at one another. Try to make eye contact, even briefly, with each other person in the circle.

Awesome!

Now. We're going to toss a ball around this circle, but I don't want to make it too hard, so we're going to use an *imaginary* ball. See? [demonstrate] I'm going to pick someone to start... [select] [X], you're going to start, okay? Right! Now when I say "go" you're going to look at someone else in the circle and throw the ball to them, and as you throw it you're going to say your sweet thing. Here. I'll start by gently tossing you the ball. The point isn't to give your best imaginary fastball, it's to actually pass it to someone else. I'm going to look at you, and I'm going to

say MY sweet thing, and toss you the ball. Right? And when you receive the ball, you're going to say "thank you, [my sweet thing]" to acknowledge that you have it. Then YOU pick someone else to throw the ball to, share YOUR sweet thing, and they'll thank you for it and repeat it, okay? Like this!

["Hot air balloons!" "Thank you, hot air balloons!"] (~4:30)

[invite a few rounds of the game - everyone should get a turn.]

Thank you, volunteers! Awesome! Now, I wonder if any of you want to share YOUR sweet things? [invite folks to stand if they'd like, just where they are, and try to get the "ball" tossed around the sanctuary a bit] (~5:10)

FANTASTIC! Thank you, everyone!! Let's give our volunteers a big round of applause!

Whew, y'all. That felt great. Did that feel good? Thank you for playing along.

Many of you know or remember that I was at a learning conference for religious professionals a few weeks ago now. This is an every-few-years conference to help keep us learning and growing, understanding that this work

requires us to stay open, to stay flexible. One of our watchwords for the week was “pivot,” as in “Be ready to pivot!” or “Are you all ready for another pivot?”

We needed this time together, not just because our jobs do require us to be always learning, always growing - but because we needed to connect with others and cultivate some joy.

The game we just played came directly out of my experience of the conference, because I took a weeklong class called “A Liberation Theology of Improv.” A group of religious professionals doing improv games with each other all week might not sound like learning at first, but it was honestly a time of tremendous growth and engagement. Games like the ones we just played teach us about mindfulness, about interdependence, about trust, about working for the good of others. You see, in improv, the point is to make the other people in the scene or game look good. You take whatever you are given - someone’s sweet thing - and you affirm it with a yes, or a thank you as we’ve just seen! There will be times when you don’t like what your scene partner or partners give you, when you’re doing improv. But the learning comes in when you stay curious, affirming, and open.

Now, can you think of a situation where you might not like

the way things are going? Just ...you know, maybe off the top of your head? Surely you might be able to bring to mind a circumstance or an idea that you're just not that happy about? Mmmhmmm. Yep.

Please understand that by bringing to mind deeply serious and important and perilous situations like the one we find ourselves in in this country at this moment in history, I'm not trying to make a game of the actual historical circumstances. The games we play when we do improvisation help us to flex the mental, emotional, and spiritual muscles to allow us to respond to each moment in a mindful and fully present way.

For the time we were playing this game, what were you all thinking of? Just replaying your own sweet thing in your mind? Caught up in what others were saying? Paying attention to whether the ball might be coming to you next? It's a sweet spot itself, to find that balance of self-awareness and other-focus that lets us stay fully present to one another even - especially - in hard times.

“[Flare](#) up like a flame
and make big shadows I can move in.

Let everything happen to you: beauty and terror.
Just keep going. No feeling is final.

Don't let yourself lose me.

Nearby is the country they call life.
You will know it by its seriousness.

Give me your hand.”

The country they call life, *to be known by its seriousness*. We know how serious life can be. We know how heavy it can feel. And we also know how much lighter it can feel when we have a hand to hold, someone to tell you, just keep going. We can take it, together. Beauty and terror. No feeling is final.

How many of you have ever been on a roller coaster? When I read this poem by Rilke, I think of being on a rollercoaster with someone I trust...climbing that very first hill, the slow TICK - TICK - TICK as the cars are pulled up, the awful/wonderful sensation in the pit of my stomach knowing soon there will come a drop - but that I will be safe. No feeling is final. When joy is hard to find, clasping the hand of someone you trust is a great way to remind yourself of that. When joy is all around, celebrating with others - singing, eating, dancing, playing - helps you remember what that feels like, so it's easier and easier to recall when times are hard. That's the muscle we want to flex and grow and strengthen. No matter how serious the

life around us, we must be able to access joy, to recall times of celebration.

Which is why that's what today is ALL ABOUT! Now, I don't know about y'all, but February always feels to me like one of the slowest months of the year. My birthday is near the beginning of March, so when I was a kid, February was my most impatient month, waiting for my birthday to arrive. Now, we're all going to get a chance after the service today to meet folks who share our birth month - during our cake party! - but I would love to see a show of hands from anyone here whose birthday is in February. Anyone? Yay! [Acknowledge/name]

Now there are some other big holidays in February. Let's crowdsource this - what are the big February holidays? [take answers, repeat into mic] (Black History Month, Groundhog Day, Imbolc, Valentine's Day, President's Day, Lunar New Year, Mardi Gras, this year at least: Ash Wednesday, Ramadan, anything else I don't know/forgot?) Right. That's actually a LOT, for the shortest month of the year! And of course once every four years, we get an extra day, which is its own kind of holiday, Leap Day, February 29. Any February 29 babies in the room? I was born exactly one week after Leap Day, and I know when I was a kid I was glad I missed that, but now I think it would be

cool. [If there are Leap Babies present: How did you like it? Did it feel special, or weird? Etc.]

So today - think of those sweet things, the ones you shared and the ones others did. Think about the things and the people you love the best. Conjure a celebration in your heart, and bring that spirit into this room. This is how we survive. This is how we build the muscles that let us be fully present to the moment and also able to access joy. Let's play together, to prepare for the seriousness of life. Give me your hand.

So may it be.