

“Through the Eyes of Children”

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

“It’s not too late to change! We have another chance! Let’s make a stronger community where outsiders are welcome and weirdos are encouraged. Remember that one life can change many.”

Thank you, again, to the children and youth of this church, who contribute so much and who are so vitally here to remind us of all that we can be, that our faith can be. One life can change many, so can you imagine what kind of change each and every one of us can make in the lives of others, and of the world?

I already told you one story about my grandmother this morning, and I’m going to tell you another one. This is my Mom’s Mom, the grandmother who lived the closest to us when I was a child, so she was the elder that I spent the most time with who didn’t actually live in the same house with me.

My grandmother’s life was extraordinary, but I didn’t fully understand why until I was an adult. Okay, let’s be honest - I’m not sure any of us fully understand how extraordinary the lives of the people around us are, all the time, and

maybe we are particularly not mindful of those we are closest to.

My grandmother was born in 1908, at a time in this country when women didn't have the right to vote, when the lives of women were almost entirely legally dependent upon the lives of men - first their fathers, then their husbands. She married my grandfather in 1934, when she was 26 years old, and had already had to work to support herself during the Great Depression while my grandfather finished pharmacy school. While he worked in his pharmacy in Baltimore - which he only closed two days every year, Labor Day and Christmas Day - she took care of everything else in the household they kept in the apartment above the pharmacy. My mother, their oldest child, was born in 1940. They had only one other child, my uncle Bill, who was born in 1946. It didn't take long for the family to understand that Bill was a different, special child. He was born with profound developmental delays that basically meant in many ways, he wouldn't grow up the way other children would. My mother remembered understanding that Bill was different, but she was raised to love him and look out for him just like any little brother. My grandmother was unflagging in her devotion to the care and wellbeing not just of my uncle, but also my mother, and eventually, my grandfather, when he became ill and unable to work.

My grandmother lived a long, wonderful life, until she died in 2003 at the age of 95. And though I knew how hard she had worked to take care of her family during her life, after her death I learned about something else she'd done. When my uncle Bill was a little boy, she'd wanted to take him to Sunday school at the Lutheran church the family attended. The Sunday school teachers said they were sorry, a student with Bill's unique needs couldn't participate in their class. In other words, he wasn't welcome. I am sure that the Sunday school teachers at that church didn't mean to be unwelcoming, of course - they just didn't know what to do with a child who was different, so they didn't try.

Not my grandmother! She took it upon herself to start the first Lutheran Sunday school for developmentally disabled children. In the article about this that I read only after she had died, there was a quote from my grandmother: "All children are beloved children of God, and my son should have just as much right to know God's love as any child." For her contribution to the faith, she was given a special award. When she died, she wanted that award - it was a big glass thing - buried with her, which is how I heard this whole story. And I was blown away with admiration for my grandmother all over again.

I know that my grandmother changed so many lives for the better, all acting out of love for her son, and letting that naturally extend out to become love for all children. In the parlance of her faith, after all, each of us is a beloved child of God.

In the parlance of this faith, where there is no dictate as to how or whether one should worship or believe in a figure they label God, we still are very familiar with the concept of Love. We know about love large and small, selfless and selfish and everywhere in-between. We know about the Love that moves mountains and the Love that whispers in our ears when we feel scared or alone. We know about the love of parents and the love of children, the love of aunties and uncles and cousins and siblings and friends and partners and chosen family. We not only know that it takes a village to raise a child, in this faith I do believe we strive to be that village.

But today, in the words of both the children of this congregation and this particular interpretation of the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child, we are reminded that the Love, the learning, the responsibility goes both ways. We must, by every moral, ethical, and legal code, care for and protect the wellbeing of children everywhere. But we must also be open to the learning and the growth and the challenges that those children present

to us. When our children grow and start to ask us the big questions, it's not our job to have every answer close at hand. It's our job to use those questions to begin a dialogue that will never end, as we welcome our children into the larger dance of life that is more than a conversation, but is a symphony and a cacophony both, a place both Love-Filled and glaringly devoid of Love.

At the start of their letter to us, the children of this church thanked us. "The World would be different without you. We are proud of the good work you have done and are still doing. You have shown us that it's okay to fight for something we believe in." But then they tell us how scared they are - that the government is being dangerously irresponsible, that the resources of the Earth are being squandered, that wars continue even though they are perilous to every living thing, especially children.

Their request for us? "Please help us make the best of what happens." And, again, "It's not too late to change! We have another chance! Let's make a stronger community where outsiders are welcome and weirdos are encouraged. Remember that one life can change many."

One life can change many. Many lives can shift a whole church, a whole community, a whole culture. It's long, slow, frustrating work. And becoming an adult - are you

listening, adults? This is the most important part! - becoming an adult doesn't mean you get to tap out of this process! It is awe-inspiring to watch our children grow up into the fully amazing people they are...and their leadership, insight, and energy can sometimes make us adults feel like "Oh, everything's going to be fine - the kids are all right." You've heard this, right? You know it to be true? Well, it is and it isn't. The kids ARE all right. AND, it's still our duty to be here reminding ourselves and each other that we are a contiguous community across generations. Children need adults and adults NEED children. I don't have children of my own, which is why I volunteered so much with children and youth in my home congregation before I became a minister. When children become adolescents become young adults, they still need the wisdom of older adults, they still need strength and encouragement when things are hard. This is what our children are asking for. This is what the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child was convened to spell out and make entirely obvious, in plain writing: It is our moral duty to protect children. All children.

Everywhere. Not just because it is the right thing to do, but because we need them. We need them here with us on Sundays, we need them when we are out together in the world. They need us to be present with them. I hope you'll consider, deeply, what the beloved children of this congregation are asking for, and how you might answer

them. What a beautiful, beloved community we are - and can continue to grow and be!