Peter had a vision. He saw a large sheet being lowered down from heaven. As the sheet got closer, he saw that the sheet held reptiles and birds. Well, let’s listen to what the Book of Leviticus has to say about reptiles (11:29-31): “…the weasel, the mouse, the great lizard according to its kind, the gecko, the land crocodile, the lizard, the sand lizard, and the chameleon. These are unclean for you among all that swarm; whoever touches one of them when they are dead shall be unclean until the evening.” And, here is what Leviticus has to say about birds (11:13-19): “These you shall regard as detestable among the birds. They shall not be eaten; they are an abomination: the eagle, the vulture, the osprey, the buzzard, the kite of any kind; every raven of any kind; the ostrich, the nighthawk, the sea gull, the hawk of any kind; the little owl, the cormorant, the great owl, the water hen, the desert owl, the carrion vulture, the stork, the heron of any kind, the hoopoe, and the bat.” These cleanliness rules were integral to Peter’s way of being. He grew up in a culture where these rules were a given – so much a part of his way of life that he would never question their validity, any more than he would question his need to drink water for sustenance or to wear clothing for warmth. One does not eat unclean animals. Yet, a voice is telling Peter to kill and eat. And when Peter resists, he hears: “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.” What God has made clean, you must not call profane. How is our way of life so much a part of us that we don’t even recognize when our words and actions devalue the other?

Austin Channing Brown grew up in Cleveland and Toledo. Her book *I’m Still Here: Black Dignity in a World Made for Whiteness* is a must read (New York: Convergent, 2018).
She opens with these words: “White people can be exhausting. Particularly exhausting are white people who don’t know they are white, and those who need to be white. But of all the white people I’ve met—and I’ve met a lot of them in more than three decades of living, studying, and working in places where I’m often the only Black woman in sight—the first I found exhausting were those who expected me to be white” (pg. 11). Our way of life can be so much a part of us that we don’t even recognize how our accepted norms devalue others.

Austin shares her experience of starting a new job (pgs. 18-20). She writes: “Within my first few weeks of working, the organization’s stereotypes, biases, or prejudices begin to emerge. Comments about my hair. Accolades for being ‘surprisingly articulate’ or ‘particularly entertaining.’ Requests to ‘be more Black’ in my speech. Questions about single moms, the hood, ‘black-on-black crime,’ and other hot topics I am supposed to know all about because I’m Black. So I bring up the incidents with my safe person—the one who said she wants to know about these encounters—but the response is some version of ‘perhaps you misunderstood’ or ‘I’m sure he didn’t mean it like that.’ Oftentimes the responsibility to extend compassion falls on me. ‘You really ought to go back to talk to him. Perhaps if you were more patient, you could see his heart.’” Austin continues, “I am not interested in getting anyone in trouble; I am trying to clarify what it’s like to exist in a Black body in an organization that doesn’t understand it is not only Christian but also white. But instead of offering empathy and action, whiteness finds new names for me and offers ominous advice. I am too sensitive, and should be careful with what I report. I am too angry, and should watch my tone when I talk about my experiences. I am too inflexible, and should learn to offer more grace to people who are really trying. It’s exhausting.”

Our faith invites us into this hard work, understanding that what we view as normative is normative only for our tribe, or our friend group, or our segment of the community, or our little
corner of the world. And, our faith invites us to understand that when we do not recognize that we have assumed certain actions and perspectives as normative, then we easily devalue what we have determined is other than normative. One of my professors in seminary when explaining an idea would use cooking analogies rather the standard sports analogies. I found it so refreshing that an idea was being explained in a way in which I could relate. Perhaps this example is a glimpse into how our lives are shaped by accepted norms, how our words and actions are influenced by accepted norms.

How does our professed faith to love one another align with our words and actions? Jesus did not come to judge, but to save, to open our hearts to the possibility of all that life can be when we love fully, when we embrace the diversity that makes us whole. I can’t stop thinking about the words Bishop Hollingsworth shared when he was with us two weeks ago. The other is always Jesus. Amen.