Back when I was a little kid in Sunday School, I remember seeing illustrations of the blanket coming down from heaven to a sleepy, hungry Peter, and it all looked kind of creepy to me. The animals on it, snakes and stuff, were animals that scared me. And God was putting it all in his face and telling him to eat it. No wonder Peter’s a little put off.

In the story I shared with the kids, Jesus says as I have loved you, so, love one another. But wait a minute, can you actually command someone to love someone else? As I also said in the children’s moment, I am continually beseeching my children to just love each other already. If anyone has any parenting tips that apply, please talk to me after the service. So how about if we took this commandment and applied it to the blanket with the snake on it. I can respect and even admire the beauty of snakes, from a distance. I can also appreciate their basic goodness, their created-by-God quality and importance to the ecosystem. But I don’t want one for a pet, thank you very much. I don’t want to actually touch one. I suspect that Peter was also experiencing something akin to fear, not like a fear of snakes, more like the fear expressed in the title of the REM song “Losing My Religion.” His fear, in this instance, was a barrier to love.

Let's take a trip to Joppa. Joppa is and was a port city. It looks really pretty in photographs but the thing that I find interesting about it today is that it was where the prophet Jonah set sail to escape his calling to preach in the city of Nineveh. He was supposed to bring them teachings about repentance and he didn’t want to. The Assyrians who lived there were different, had a different religion and culture and he had certain biases towards them, figured they did bad things they should be punished for. It made him angry that God would ask such a thing of him. But God made 2 things pretty clear: first, that The World Maker also loved and cared for the people of Ninevah, and second, that this Wise One wanted Jonah to learn a thing or two. So Jonah came into some bad weather while out at sea and ended up getting eaten by a fish and spat out on the shore and lo and behold, he ended up going to Nineveh after all, griping and complaining the whole way, and, would you believe it, the folks of Nineveh performed one of the most impressive acts of public repentance I’ve read about in the bible. Even the animals repented. The whole city repented. So deep was their repentance, their desire to change for the better, that it practically became a new city overnight.

So I didn’t just tell this story because it happens to be one of my very favourite stories in the bible. I told it because Peter was also in Joppa when he said, no don’t tell me to eat unclean food, don’t tell me to eat unclean food, don’t tell me to eat unclean food. And from there he ended up travelling to Ceasaria where he met a lovely man named Cornelius and his family with whom he enjoyed a meal. A meal of unclean food.

Now I feel the need here to inject a little bit I learned about sharing food in Jewish culture, and I am by no means an expert. But I came to understand that there were and are legitimate and important religious reasons for Jews not to eat with Gentiles. I was left with the understanding that the Judean apostles and believers were upset with Peter because eating with Cornelius created real barriers between him and his Jewish family of believers for whom he was an important leader. It may have created confusion and doubt for new family members at their table. You see, for the early church, sharing meals was incredibly important for two reasons: one, because during Jesus’s final meal, he asked that they remember him in the way they share food, and two, because they were Jewish, and for Jews, sharing food together was and is a very sacred thing. The shabbat is the way Jews worship, as a family, around the table. A truly intergenerational form of worship. The synagogue is primarily for teaching, the table for worship. And, contrary to what I’d been taught, the practice of not eating with gentiles was and is not because Jews considered or consider Gentiles bad or inferior. In the Jewish faith there is not a sense of superiority so much as set-apartness. They believe they have more rules they have to follow than gentiles, who are only required to obey the 7 laws of Noah. Good people are good people before God, regardless of their religion. And Cornelius and family were good people. But they were not Jewish. It is also interesting to note that later on Peter shifted his practices and resumed only sharing meals with other Jews. The apostle Paul criticized him for it, but I suspect he had his reasons.

Now, back to the story of Peter and his unclean meal. Here, as in other instances in the bible, the Holy Spirit offers itself as a blessing to others through the person filled with it. When we step back and notice that the ones filled with the spirit were Cornelius and his family, it reinforces that the blessing in this story is primarily for Peter, and so is the learning. The story begins in the previous chapter describing this man, Cornelius as devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly. He is told in a vision to seek out Peter, I would say to bless him and teach him as much as to hear his words. Peter learns that to open his heart to the Gentiles who reach out to him and to share his faith story is also to learn from and receive blessings from them. Between them, something that begins as mutual respect and curiosity grows into a shared freedom, a Spirit kiss.

There’s a unique, often forgotten role that religion can play and that is to offer freedom. Yes, freedom. It offers rules only to ask us to break them when the time is right. The freeing power of the true spirit of religion can, at its best, remove the bars that keep us caged, that keep us stifled, turned in ourselves; the barriers that keep us fearing and hating ourselves and each other. It offers down from heaven a blanket that holds everything: including the things we thought we were not supposed to touch or want or care for or take in. When the Creator of All declares something clean, how dare you say it’s not? Once my dad, in a context of growing Islamophobia within his faith community and even within himself, moved by the Holy Spirit, felt compelled to stand up in front of everyone and declare that God loves Muslims. A tiny seed of freedom born of faith.

If you have listened to my sermons before you may have noticed that often at some point, I invite you to experience something in your body, right where you are. Today I invite you to focus for just a moment on your own freedom here and now. Feel the space around yourself, become just a little bit detached from yourself, if you can, by noticing your bodily sensations, your breath, twinges of tension, thoughts that flicker past. In this moment, quiet yourself just enough to remember that you have choices. Listen to your body, listen to your heart, the quiet voice in your heart that tells you what’s true. With your heart’s wisdom you can then identify the right choice for you. This kind of lucidity and awakeness feels right and empowering. Rest in it for a while and you’ll wonder why you ever wander from it. But old habits die hard and we live in a culture of chaotic distractions that make it all too easy to drift back off to sleep, even if wakefulness is more restful than the nightmares we often fall into when we sleep. But after you notice you’ve fallen asleep again, be as gentle with yourself as you would be to a child who awakens from a nightmare.

The freedom that comes from faith in God when offered then has to be chosen, and not just once, but repeatedly. Daily. Every new start that falters, every best self that disappears the next day, the blossoms that come in Spring and just as quickly fade away. The World Maker cares for us the way that they care for the grass that blooms and then fades: tenderly, eternally, momentously. There’s that beautiful quote from Rumi: “Come, come, whoever you are. Wanderer, worshiper, lover of leaving. It doesn't matter. Ours is not a caravan of despair. Come, even if you have broken your vows a thousand times. Come, yet again, come, come.”

There is a saying that life is not a rehearsal. I disagree with that. I think we are given lots of opportunities to tweak, change or improve in increments. Slowly, painfully, joyfully. One step forward, two steps back. This is the glory of living. Jesus talked about being glorified right when he was on the threshhold of death. This is the dignity of our existence. Even as we die we *have* lived, and life has infinite value to the One Who Transcends the World and is Hidden Within. I sense that in my centogenarian clients in the Sunnybrook veteran’s hospital. The sheer glory of their existence and the value that, if anything, only increases and ripens over time. So I think life is a rehearsal. We practice the same scene again and again until we get it right, experiencing multiple opportunities for redemption. We rehearse our roles until we die. But unlike a rehearsal, there is an audience. An audience of one.

That audience of one, that Creator-and-Delighter-In-Us-and-In-Everything, loves flowers. A flower that I think offers a beautiful metaphor for the human experience of repentance is the morning glory, a flower that brightens and withers repeatedly as days come and go. I think we are morning glories. We each are offered the glory of waking up each morning and having the freedom to decide what’s happening with this day: how am I going to live in this body, in this place today? Forgiveness, rebirth. Every day we’re offered the freedom to be a little less fearful, a little more loving.

I read the description of the New Jerusalem as a metaphor for a paradigm shift, a beautiful mass repentance that rivals the one in Ninevah. I love roller coasters and scary rides. Anyone who has gone on one with me will know how loudly, continuously and gleefully I laugh. Anyway, one of the things I like the most in a ride is when they are engineered so that you can see the faces of other people who are also enjoying the ride. In that moment, when we are all experiencing the same thing at the same time and enjoying the heck out of it, how beautiful we are! We smile broadly at the stranger across from us, laugh and hoot and holler together. That’s what I think about when I think about this metaphor of a new Jerusalem. Everyone reconciled, everyone enjoying themselves and seeing themselves in each other for the first time. The first small inclination to love pinballing from person to person until everyone and everything is changed forever. The fullness of promise embedded in this beautiful dream is summarized in two apparently contradictory phrases. A paradox that, nevertheless reflects the reality of a work in progress from our perspective, and a complete and perfect world from the point of view of the Eternal One: “I am making everything new” and “it is done.”