The members of the Jerusalem Council finish their church debate. Everyone sits anxiously. Then Peter stands, his mouth dry. He looks out into the eyes of his brothers and sisters. Peter’s journey with Jesus has led him to this moment, standing and speaking truth before the church.

In a scene several years earlier, Peter stands on his father’s boat holding his fishing nets. Off on the shores of the Sea of Galilee he sees a rabbi named Jesus who calls out to him. “Come follow me and I’ll make you fishers of men.”

Later Peter stands on a mountain with Jesus. Elijah and Moses are there. Here he gives his first speech about building three temples for all to come worship Jesus. But this is not the way of Christ. Not long after, Peter stands by a fire on the night of Jesus’ arrest. He speaks out three times denying any relation to Jesus. But this is not way of Christ either.

Now, Peter stands and speaks up once again. But this speech is different.

This is the climactic scene when one of the key characters stands and gives the epic speech that changes everything. This is Mel Gibson as William Wallace with his face painted blue in *Braveheart*. This is Colin Firth as the stuttering King George VI in *The King’s Speech*. This is our pastor of twenty-six years standing in the pulpit, preaching humbly after a Supreme Court decision.

Everyone is silent – digesting the words for themselves, seeing how their journey is crossing paths with the journey of the church.

Peter’s path began standing with Jesus. Last week we read about Peter standing with three uncircumcised gentiles. With this revelation from Christ, now Peter stands before the church.

His story of transformation through the saving grace of Jesus gives him courage. Peter speaks with authority to the church wrestling with their future identity and direction. Peter has learned the way of Christ.

For the way of Christ is not the place where you stand but the posture of how you stand.

As it was for Peter and the early Church this truth is also for us.

As the church, a body of believers, a group of Christ followers, we stand together.

The challenge of standing together is connecting our individual journeys with the whole journey of the church.

There is a saying that I hear from time to time, “Jesus did not come to start a new religion.” Well maybe he did. The root of our English word “religion” simply means to bind or tie together. The Latin word is “religio” – reconnecting our individual parts to the whole. Religious behavior is our way of experiencing God together. Christ’s life and work “religionizes” us or unites us in one spirit.

When our focus shifts from positions to postures we stand together bound by the Holy Spirit. We are united even though we all come from different places in life. We all have different stories, different perspectives, and different opinions.
Unity does not mean conformity.

The church is a place where we need to debate and wrestle with truth. Standing together does not mean we always have to agree. If anything, full agreement all the time weakens the church.

However, like putting stress on our bones makes them stronger, we become stronger straining and strengthening our spiritual muscles during church conferences.

Finding the way of truth together is redeeming but the process can be rather miserable in the moment. In his book *Falling Upward*, Richard Rohr writes, “Church membership requirements, church doctrine and church morality forces almost all issues to an inner boiling point, where you are forced to face important issues at a much deeper level to survive.”

The church is like a crucible or vessel that holds molten metal in one place long enough to be purified and clarified. Holding the spiritual tension while disagreeing is what we call church discernment.

This spiritual discernment process shows that a church can go beyond its previous boundaries while also maintaining boundaries at the same time. In order for the church to survive critical moments in their formation they have to move into unfamiliar territory.

This journey into the unknown does not occur overnight. For the church in Acts, the issue of circumcision has been cooking in the crockpot for some time now.

For some, the aroma of change seeps like lunch being prepared down in Community Hall. The smell of buttery, garlic rolls makes those of us sitting in the Sanctuary grumble with hunger. For others, the whiff of change is like walking into the bunkroom of junior high boys on the last day of youth camp. It makes you sick to your stomach.

Church discernment evokes a variety of challenging changes.

In the early church, there is a group of Jewish Christians who are struggling with Peter’s vision for the Gentile Christians. They are wrestling with old laws while the Church is moving in new directions.

Old infrastructures are vital to the formation of new constructions.

One of my favorite TV shows is *Fixer Upper* on the HGTV channel. Johanna and Chip Gains are hilarious and love taking beautiful old homes in Waco and creating new homes for families. The challenge is keeping the integrity of the old home while making modern updates. They find old knob-and-wire electrical systems that are dangerous and illegal. At times they find walls full of asbestos that must be removed carefully for the health of the family.

Chip and Johanna have found a way to use the beautiful fundamentals of the “old,” laying the foundation for creating a beautiful “new.”

The church in Acts is in a similar process of holding the tension between the beauty of the old and the coming beauty of the new. The Church is holding onto the laws of the Jews while Jesus is calling them to be open to the love of the Gentiles.

They have been living in homes of Jewish rules and rituals for centuries.

Since the exit from Egypt, the Israelite people have been maintaining their cultural holiness for centuries. I can only imagine the internal difficulties they are feeling as they shift from old covenants into a new covenant.
For Jesus has come, leaving his word and the Holy Spirit for the church.

Peter, with the help of James, uses their old method of understanding, the Hebrew Scriptures, in order to discover a new direction for the Church. This does not mean giving into culture but rather sharing in the work of the Spirit.

They do not disregard the foundation that was laid by God through their Israelite ancestors. They build upon it.

Fundamental foundations are extremely important. It is important to have boundaries that create structures for developing strong identity. Studies say it is vital for people to have security and some success in the early years of development.

We all need boundaries, safety and some degree of order in the first half of our lives. Robert Frost says, “Good fences make good neighbors.”

But Frost would agree that you have to one day cross over those fences and meet your neighbors. This is when we move into the second half of life.

Jesus has an interesting response in Luke’s gospel when they tell him “the old wineskins are good enough.” But Jesus knows that if we do not get new wineskins, both the wine and the wineskins will be lost.

The early church has been given new wine as will each generation of the church to come. We are a church, an old voice rooted in Christian faith with a new word of love for the world. It is important to remember our roots, our church home built 2,000 years ago. But we do not live there anymore.

The familiar can be falsely reassuring and many make homes there permanently. Homes are not meant to be lived in – but only to be moved out from. The journey with Christ is where we find home.

It is important to have foundations of faith that ground us but the second half of life is not about staying on the ground, stuck behind fences. Our “egos” would do anything to avoid change for we love the status quo, even when it’s not working.

We often get trapped in attaching ourselves to positions of fear from the past, present or even the future. But our postures should be love of Christ and love of neighbor. The home of the church is rooted in the heart of Jesus.

There are literal readings, figurative readings and historical readings of scripture. The Church, through the heart of Christ discovers truthful readings. The faithful interpretations of Scripture and the leading of the Holy Spirit are intertwined.

Jesus is the guide for Peter’s interpretation of scripture to the council. He quotes Leviticus 26:41, “true circumcision is a matter of the heart.” Peter’s speech is a reminder that God knows everyone’s heart for all believers – those circumcised and uncircumcised, those on the inside and those on the outside.

Wherever you stand, whether here or there or over there – standing together is an attitude of the heart.

What are the motives of our heart? Are our hearts being disagreeable because of pride or personal ambition? Or are we disagreeing to wrestle with issues about who God is and how God acts in our world. This attitude shapes the future and identity of the church. This is how we find the way of Christ in our time.
Like the early Church we know that God is continually faithful for this is seen by the workings of the Spirit that Paul and Barnabas are testifying.

There are no party lines or equal partners in Christ. We all share in the gracious reality of God’s impartiality.

I would not be standing here this morning, preaching in this pulpit if Wilshire was not able to stand together over twenty years ago on the issue of women is ministry. Some of you sitting in the pews this morning would not be members of this church if Wilshire was not able to stand together on this issue of affirmation of baptism.

I wonder in the future who else will share a similar testimony?

This is the reality of God’s love that unites us together through the saving grace of Jesus Christ.

Christ has moved the church from laws that divide to love that unites. We may not fully understand or have words that articulate the movement of the Spirit across time and space but that does not mean God is not holding everything together.

Albert Einstein knew that a single world of elementary forces, principles, and particles are somehow held together in the entire universe of space and time. He along with the rest of the scientific world calls this force the unified field.

Christ is our unified field. In the last chapter of Luke, Jesus stands and gives one final speech.

Then he said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms must be fulfilled.” Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them,

“Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.

Peter stands alongside the other disciples watching Jesus ascend into the clouds above. Then their hearts unite together in worship.

Amen.