The questions begin on the playground. What are the rules of the game? Someone speaks up with a long list of do’s and don’ts. “The pine tree is out of bounds, but the dwarf maple is in fair territory.”

Another voice asks: “What about the creek?”

“Creeks are always out of bounds?” comes the confident reply.

“Oh yeah, who says?”

Who says? Who has the authority to name the rules of the game? And can these rules be more than a list of do’s and don’ts, fairs and fouls. Can the rules be a resource for a life of hope, joy, and peace?

The question of authority is raised in our gospel lesson: Matthew 21:23 (NRSV)

23 When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?”

The Apostle Paul points us to the day when all questions are answered and our longing for a life of hope, joy, and peace is fulfilled under the authority of the One whose name is above every name:

Philippians 2:9–11 (NRSV) Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, 10 so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

The question of authority is answered by Paul with the three word confession of faith that changes everything: Jesus is Lord. Our gospel lesson has much to teach us about this confession, so take a knee and change your mind.

1. Take A Knee

Coaching can turn a team around. We see it happen as a season unfolds. At first, there is no team. There is simply a gathering of individuals who are on different pages going different directions to the beat of different drummers. They couldn’t beat a drum, but through persistence, discipline, and guidance this gathering coalesces into a team with everyone on the same page headed in the same direction at the same time. Victory is won on the practice field as the coach exercises authority by saying to the players, “Take a knee.”
Of course, the coach’s instruction is only beneficial if the players are coachable, and this invites us to consider how open we are to learning from our gospel lesson. The temptation we face is to distance ourselves from Jesus’ encounters with the religious authorities of his day. “What a shame they didn’t understand,” we say. “How could they not have known?” we wonder. “Ah, but that was then, this is now, and we know better.” We assure ourselves that we would respond differently to Jesus if we were there, and ironically enough; thereby, we resist Jesus’ authority over our lives just as completely as the Chief Priests and elders did.

We’re more like those religious authorities than we care to admit, but the motivations that prompted their response impact our lives as well. In Matthew 21:23-32 we encounter a frightened group of men who exert their authority in a vain attempt to gain control of a situation that threatens to spin out of control.

Matthew 21 begins with Palm Sunday. Jesus makes his triumphal entry into Jerusalem on a colt as the crowd shouts, Matthew 21:9–10 (NRSV) “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!” 10 When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, “Who is this?”

Jesus continues to make quite an entrance into Jerusalem as he goes into a rage and cleanses the Temple saying, Matthew 21:13 (NRSV) “It is written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer’; but you are making it a den of robbers.”

Jesus spends the night in Bethany; now, he’s back in the Temple and the Chief Priests and elders have some questions: Who is this guy? Who does he think he is? How much of a threat is he?

Messiahs are dangerous. They disturb our peace. Jesus has already upset apple carts in the Temple. What’s next? Who’s next? Will he upset the political order and the fragile relationship between Rome and the Sanhedrin? Will he lead the people astray so that they no longer submit to their authority? Has he already lead the people astray?

Messiahs are dangerous, and they are afraid. The status quo is in peril. Things may be about to change, and God-only-knows what that will mean.

Fear is the opposite of faith. Fear has us hold on for dear life to the life we know. Fear prevents us from seeing that God is at work in John the Baptist or in Jesus of
Nazareth or in my neighbor or in new understandings of the challenges before us or in broadening our sense of right and wrong, fair and foul. Instead of receiving the hope, joy and peace God’s work offers us, we circle the wagons and do everything in our power to hold on to what we know.

Messiahs are dangerous, and we are afraid. The status quo is in peril. Things may be about to change, and God-only-knows what that will mean. We’ll do whatever it takes to play it safe. We’ll even crucify someone.

What are we afraid of? What is the status quo that we want to hold onto? What difference would it make if we owned our fear, if we confessed it and called it what it is, and instead of continuing to resist Jesus’ authority and teaching, we took a knee, listened to him, and learned?

Take a knee. Change your mind.

2. Change Your Mind

The Chief Priests and elders will not take a knee, so Jesus tells us a parable. There was a father with two sons. He sends son #1 into the vineyard (there’s that vineyard again!). Son #1 says, “I won’t go,” but he does. He sends son #2 into the vineyard. Son #2 says, “I’ll go, sir,” but he doesn’t go. And then Jesus invites us to judge ourselves, “Which one did the will of the Father?”

Who are we in this story? Which son are we? The good son or the not-so-good son?

Yes. Yes, we are the good son and we are the not-so-good son. We are the people who resist Jesus’ teaching but somehow find our way to obedience. We are the people who talk a good game but we do what we want to do. We live in Berks County where Dutchmen and Dutchwomen are known to be ... determined.

We won’t change our minds easily. That’s both a vice and a virtue. We believe in Jesus. Jesus is Lord, so when we are challenged to change our minds, we wonder: Are we diluting the faith? Are we denying the Lord or following Him? What will people think?

On the other hand, if we don’t change our minds, are we like the Chief Priests and elders who could not see that God was at work in John the Baptist and Jesus? What amazing works of God are we missing because we won’t change our minds?
There are no easy answers here; no tried and true formulas that apply to every question. There are simply two sons; one who took a knee and submitted to his Father and one who did not. Behind them stand the Chief Priests and elders who let fear freeze them in place and keep them from following.

Feel your fear, and do it anyway. Change is hard and coping with the uncertainty of when we should change our minds and when we should cling to our convictions is a significant part of the challenge.

“Do not be afraid” is the most often repeated command in the Bible. The first things angels typically say when they show up in someone’s life is “Do not be afraid.” Jesus promises us, John 14:27 (NRSV) Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.

The chief priests and elders let fear be their guide. They wouldn’t answer Jesus because they feared the people.

Don’t be afraid. Don’t let fear dictate what you will and won’t do. Don’t let fear determine when you will change your mind and when you will cling to your convictions.

Face your fear with faith. Take a knee. Confess the faith: Jesus is Lord. The heart of discipleship is taking up a cross and following. God is at work in our lives and in this world. God is making all things new (including us). And God is still not doing sky writing to tell us what to do! Instead, God is disturbing our peace. The Messiah is dangerous. Following Him can scare the Jesus into us.

This world isn’t the way God wants it! The kingdom of God is coming! Things are going to change. We are not the way God wants us. We confess it every Sunday when we confess our sin and our faith. We are going to change.

Face your fear with faith. Change is hard, but Jesus never promised us that following Him would be easy. His parables don’t give us simple answers. They challenge us to think! They disturb our peace with the possibility that we might be missing something; we might even be in the way.