

Texts: Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32; Psalm 25:1-9, Philippians 2:1-13; Matthew 21:23-32

“At the name of Jesus, every knee shall bend...”

There’s been a firestorm on mainstream media and social media this past week about what it means when professional football players “take a knee” and kneel to the ground. Are they disrespecting the flag and the national anthem? Are they legitimately protesting police brutality? The opinions run the gamut and once more have split this nation into two camps.

Most of the time, kneeling is a sign of devotion and humility. People used to kneel before kings and before bishops – those people who represented secular and religious authority. So when someone takes a knee, is it a gesture of respect or one of disrespect? I guess it depends on what it is that you kneel to. I guess it depends on your view of authority.

Let me set the scene of this morning’s gospel reading. The day before this conversation takes place, Jesus rode a donkey into Jerusalem and people lined the streets waving palm branches at him and shouting “Hosanna to the Son of David.” Jesus made a gesture that ridiculed the authority of the occupying Empire. A king would ride into town on a horse, symbolizing his military strength. But Jesus’ choice of a donkey fulfilled a prophecy about the Messiah, the descendant of King David who would restore the throne.

Then he went straight to the temple and threw out all the merchants who were selling doves and other small animals for sacrifices. He overturned the tables of the money changers, the people who made their livings changing Roman coins for the temple coins. Then in the middle of all that chaos and confusion, in the middle of the upside-down tables and people diving for the scattered coins; in the middle of everyone trying to catch the

doves that escaped from their cages – in the middle of all that, blind and lame people came to Jesus and he healed them.

Imagine that you are one of those chief priests, those religious leaders. In your view, Jesus has just disrespected the religious institution of the temple and your own leadership. Yesterday's mess has finally been cleaned up. And now here he comes again, this same Jesus, this wandering preacher along with his rowdy band of followers, back to the temple.

Perhaps you can imagine the anger behind their question. By whose authority are you doing these things? Who gave you this authority? Meaning, who are you? How dare you? How can you possibly claim to be from God? We, the chief priests and the elders, we are the keepers of the traditions. We are the keepers of order. We are the ones who are in charge of the worship practices that have been handed down through generations in this temple that has stood for hundreds of years. We are the ones who are right with God, the only ones who are worthy to enter into the presence of God before the holy of holies.

Perhaps you can imagine the fear behind their question. The crowds have been cheering for Jesus in the streets. These chief priests have seen the faces of those who came to him to be cured of their blindness and lameness, the ones who carried their children to him to be touched and blessed. They are afraid that they are on the brink of a popular movement that they can't control. They need to keep order, or the Roman soldiers will step in and take over.

“By whose authority do you do these things?” they ask. And Jesus turns the question right back at them. “You ask about me,” he says, “let’s talk about John the Baptist. By whose authority did he baptize? Did it come from heaven or was it of human origin.” In other words, was it a God thing or did he make it all up himself?

Ah, John the Baptizer. Another wandering preacher with a rowdy band of followers. Another fulfiller of prophecy who bucked the authority of the scribes and Pharisees. Back in the 3rd chapter of Matthew's gospel, we read that "the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to see him, all along the region of the Jordan."

(3:5) What's more, John himself made a gesture that galvanized the crowds: He dunked people in the Jordan river, offering them a powerful symbol of repentance for their sins.

All through the gospel of Matthew, the religious leaders keep asking Jesus questions, trying to trap him. This time, Jesus reverses the trap. He won't answer their question until they answer his. But they can't. If they say that John's baptism was just a human thing, they will be in trouble with the people. If they agree that it was a God thing, everyone will want to know why they did not get baptized themselves. So they take the safe choice – "We don't know."

But the chief priests are not being honest. They had also gone out to the Jordan to see John the Baptizer. He even addressed them directly, warning them to "bear fruit worthy of repentance." (3:8) But they did not submit to John's baptism precisely because it was about repentance and forgiveness, and in their view they had nothing to repent. In their view they had done nothing wrong.

And then Jesus tells this little parable. A man asks each of his two sons to do the chores. The first son says no, but then changes his mind and goes to work. The second son says yes, but doesn't do the work. Who is the obedient son?

Well, that's an easy one, right? Getting the work done is what's important. And the question beneath the parable is this: which one of the sons are you? It's about action, not about talk. It's about taking on the task, even if at first you said you wouldn't.

Jesus knew what he was talking about. In a few short chapters we will find him on his knees in the garden of Gethsemane, praying to God his father to let the cup pass from him. And then he says, “Yet not what I want, but what you want.” Jesus the obedient Son knows what he will have to do. As Paul puts it in today’s reading from Philippians, he will become obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Faith – believing – is an active verb. That’s the part that the chief priests and elders don’t understand. While they are busy arguing with Jesus, it was the tax collectors and prostitutes, the blind and the lame, the regular folks out on the street – they are the ones who get it, says Jesus.

All those people cheered for Jesus as he rode into Jerusalem. They understood something about Jesus that the religious leaders did not – he had joined them, stood beside them, lined up *with* them to be baptized by John in the Jordan river. He offered them a new way of living. A way of living that tears down the barriers and divisions between people. They understood that this offer of new life had nothing to do with who they were or what they had done in their past. And Jesus did not just talk about that new life. He lived it. So when Jesus invited them to follow him into that new life, they took him up on his offer. New life. Given freely. We call it forgiveness. We call it grace.

The Old Testament word that is translated as “repent” actually means to physically turn around. It’s a gesture that means you turn from the direction you were headed and go in a different direction, God’s direction. Every single Sunday we pray this prayer at the beginning of the service: God of all mercy and consolation, Come to the help of your people, turning us from our sin to live for you alone. Every single Sunday we have the chance to stand with Jesus and the crowds on the bank of the Jordan River and do what

they did – repent. Every single Sunday, God's own forgiveness is spoken to you. Here's a gesture to remind you of that moment. You dip your finger in the font and make the sign of the cross on your forehead.

Jesus made the ultimate gesture of love. On the cross his arms were spread wide to embrace the entire world in forgiveness. His death and resurrection have freed you from the power of sin and death. You do not have to do anything to earn it or be worthy of it. And yet, in this promise there is also the call to action. There are always two choices. You can join the chief priests and elders of the temple. You can be angry and fearful that Jesus is going to upset your comfortable way of life. You can say you will live a new life and then not do it. Or you can join that crowd of tax collectors and prostitutes and disciples. You can follow Jesus in obedience, knowing that when you stumble, it is always possible to turn back to him for help. You are offered this choice over and over. God's forgiveness is available, over and over.

In the presence of the flag, this is the gesture we make [hand over heart]. In the presence of Jesus Christ, these are the gestures we make. This one: [praying hands] or this one [sign of the cross]. Or this, [open hands] as you come forward to receive his body and blood. Believing is an action verb. It is because of what we do that people recognize us as Christians. It is how we live, the gestures we make, the actions we take. Tearing down the barriers that divide people. Looking to the interests of others before we look to our own. Becoming servants of those who are last and least.

Your actions matter to God because you matter to God. You have been freed by Christ's death and resurrection to take action: to love and serve. You don't have to do anything. Now what are you going to do? The choice is yours.