

Grace to you and peace from God our Creator and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Who is the greatest? That's what the disciples were arguing about amongst themselves to pass the time, I suppose, on their trip back home to Capernaum in today's Gospel reading. Who is the greatest? There are times when people in the Bible seem very strange and foreign, which is only to be expected of people who lived thousands of years ago on the other side of the world. But then there are other times when people in the Bible seem amazingly familiar, and this passage from Mark's Gospel is one of those times. Who is the greatest? What is the best? We are obsessed with ranking people and things in our own time and place, and so the disciples' argument doesn't surprise us in the least.

I don't know what your internet habits are like. I use it for news, shopping, and entertainment, but also for looking things up, reading articles, and listening to, or watching, talks and lectures. But if I'm not careful, I can also get drawn into wasting time on the internet, and I find that Facebook is particularly good at getting me to waste time. And one of the ways it invariably gets me is with those top ten kinds of lists of things and places. The latest was a list of the best town in every state to live in in retirement. They based the selection on the price of homes, the availability of good medical facilities, and other services important to people of the retired demographic. And of course, you have to start with Alabama and click your way through to the state you're really interested in. I'll save you the trouble and tell you that for Illinois they decided that Alton was the best place to live in retirement, which is just a few miles from where I grew up and my parents still live in North St. Louis County. But there are other lists too. Endless lists, really. You've seen them, right? The best colleges, the top ten tools that should be in every tool box, this year's top electric vehicles, and so on. And then of course there are the lists that have been around since well before the internet, like the world's richest people and all the lists that Rolling Stone Magazine puts out. They've just revised their list of the greatest songs of all time for the first time in 17 years. Bob Dylan's "Like a rolling stone" got bumped from first place, which must be disappointing for the magazine that bears its name. In case you're wondering, Aretha Franklin is now in the top spot with her song "Respect."

We put a lot of stock in listing things and ranking them. In an age of abundance and limited attention spans it's a way of organizing and making sense of the vast array of things we encounter in our daily life. I rely on Consumer Reports magazine and their lists of best products in different categories. We recently had to replace our coffee maker, and I chose one of the "best buy" options from their list of tested products. So listing and ranking can be a good and useful exercise. The problem comes when we start listing and ranking people. We do it all the time. On airplanes there are different sections for different people of different statuses: first class, business, and economy. In stadiums there are the box seats and VIP club sections for some and the nose-bleed sections for others. You can think of other examples, I'm sure. So we get how the disciples might be having a status argument. Jesus had just been up the mountain with Peter, James, and John, who seem to have been his inner circle. Only the three of them had witnessed his Transfiguration. So, maybe that's what they were arguing about on the road. Maybe the three of them were lording over the others, thinking that they were somehow better than them. And the church has followed this line of thinking. The bishop of Rome became the most important leader of the western church, later called the pope, because he was seen as being the successor of St. Peter, who had ended up in Rome and died there. It's almost as if Jesus had not challenged the

disciples' jockeying for status. We're happy to remember that elsewhere Jesus said, "you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church." It's carved into the base of the dome in St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. But we conveniently forget what Jesus says right here about the disciples' argument on the road: "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."

The other thing we put stock in, together with status, is death. We believe in it. We trust it. We use to our advantage, to advance our interests. Just before the disciples' argument on the road, Jesus has told them for the third time in two chapters that he will be betrayed and killed, and that he will rise again. The first time he says this, which was last week's Gospel reading, Peter rebukes him. Peter is adamant that Jesus must not die. Because Peter believes in death. He knows it's power. He's seen the Romans use it as an effective tool of control. He does not, however, believe in rising from the dead. He's never seen that happen. Well, there was that time back in chapter 5 that Jesus raised the daughter of Jairus, but had she really been dead? He hadn't been in the room where it happened, so he couldn't be sure. And anyway, it doesn't seem to stick, because the second time Jesus announces that he is about to die the disciples talk amongst themselves about what Jesus could possibly mean by rising. Now this third time, they are dumbfounded and afraid to ask. They believe in death. They believe it will be the end of Jesus and the end of them, too, if they're caught with him. So, when Jesus does come to be arrested, they scatter, in fear for their lives.

As I said, we believe in death too. We trust it. We spend a good chunk of our federal budget each year on our military, which is all about trusting lethal force to defend us and advance our interests around the world. We have enshrined the right to bear arms in our constitution, and have now in recent years interpreted that as a personal right to carry deadly weapons. Young people in our community have been paying attention, and they believe in death too. They believe that it will solve their problems. They find ways to acquire guns. And they're using them. There has been a rash of shootings over the past year, right here in middle America, and across the country. Not as bad as it once was, maybe, but it's moving in that direction. Let me be clear that I am not suggesting that we should disband our military or our police forces. That would be a disaster. And that just shows how difficult and complicated our situation is.

Jesus takes on both of these things that we trust, and that are so ingrained in our psyche, and so fundamental to our way of life: status and death. They are not what we were created for, not what God intends for us, because they are ultimately not good for us. In Jesus God is taking back control of the world from these false gods of ours – that's what they are, says Luther in his catechism, those things that we fear, love, and trust in place of the true God. The kingdom of God is near, says Jesus. In that kingdom the least are welcomed and cared for. In that kingdom death is no longer the final word on us and on our lives. In that kingdom, violence and the threat of violence are nowhere to be seen. In that kingdom, the greatest are the servants of all.

Jesus, in his life, death, and resurrection, brings that kingdom near to us right here and right now. He lives our life and dies our death all the while refusing to conform to the ways the kingdoms of this world do business, and so casting down our false god of status. And then by his resurrection he cast down our false god of death. Now by the power of the Holy Spirit he continues to be present with us when we gather in his name and empowers us to welcome and as his body in and for the world. May we trust his presence among us and live in sure and certain hope that the kingdom of God is near and will finally rule the world. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.