

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of 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.

We put a lot of stock in listing things and ranking them. If you've spent any time on the internet you've encountered the top ten lists: top ten songs, top ten universities, top ten states to retire in. David Letterman made satirical top-ten lists a regular feature on his late-night show. In an age of abundance and limited attention spans, ranking things is a way of organizing and making sense of the vast array of things we encounter in our daily life. I rely on Consumer Reports and their lists of best products in different categories. When we need to make a significant purchase, I always try to go for 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 suites for some and the bleachers and nose-bleed sections for others. You can think of other examples, I'm sure. So we get how the disciples might have been having a status argument. Our reading today comes soon after Jesus had been up the mountain with Peter, James, and John, who seem to have been his inner circle. Only the three of them got to witness his Transfiguration. So, maybe that's what they were arguing about "on the way." Maybe the three of them were lording over the others, thinking that they were somehow better than them. And church tradition 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 we forgot about Jesus' challenge to that way of thinking in passages like today's Gospel reading. We're happy to remember that Jesus said, "you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church." It's written around 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 way, Jesus 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 and its brutal finality. 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 afraid to ask him about it.

They believe in death and don't want to think about it. 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 will 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 recently interpreted that to mean a personal right to carry deadly weapons. And we want that right because we trust in death and the threat of death. We believe that it will solve our problems, make us secure. Never mind that studies show the opposite, that the availability of guns has led to levels of gun violence in this country that are unmatched in the developed world. But we don't want to hear it, and so we make laws that prevent our government from keeping track of firearms and their use. Let me be clear that when I shine a light on our trust in deadly force, 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: both status and death. They are not what we were created for, and not what God intends for us. And that's because they are ultimately not good for us. They turn us away from God and from one another and direct our focus inward. Our attention is given to ourselves and our own wants and needs at the expense of others. And that is why Jesus' repeated insistence on going to the cross is so upsetting to the disciples.

But Jesus goes to the cross precisely to take back control of the world from these false gods that have been ruling our lives – that's what they are, says Luther in his catechisms, false gods; those things that we fear, love, and trust in place of the true God. The reign of God is near, says Jesus, and it is displacing the reign of those false gods of ours. In the reign of God the least are welcomed and cared for. In the reign of God violence and the threat of violence are nowhere to be seen. In reign of God, the greatest are the servants of all. And in the reign of God, death is no longer the final word on us and on our lives.

But how does that promised new reality take over from the reality we face in the world as it is? When the kingdoms of this world clash, they unleash hell on earth, as we have been seeing in Gaza, Israel, and Lebanon, and in Ukraine and Russia. But God's battle with the reign of our false gods is not that kind of battle. Jesus goes to Jerusalem not to fight fire with fire, not to repay violence with violence and death with death. Jesus goes to Jerusalem to face down the powers that be and to endure the worst that they can do to him: public humiliation and death. That is how God will wrest back control of the world. Which seems foolish, and pathetic, and impossible.

Except that's not how it ends. The battle continues, impossibly, in Jesus' resurrection, which happens quietly, behind the scenes. This is not a Hollywood ending. This is a battle that continued in Jesus' encounter with his disciples after his resurrection and his sending them into the world by the power of the Holy Spirit to proclaim the promise of God's victory over sin, death and evil. It is a battle that continues now in the daily lives of those who hear and trust in that promise, and who themselves face down the powers of this world, who refuse like Jesus to return evil with evil, who see greatness in loving and caring for people regardless of their status, who in being forgiven their own sins and failings turn to others with forbearance and compassion. We are gathered here this morning, as we are every week, to be rearmed and refueled for this battle through God's word and sacraments. So take heart, dear people of God, and be encouraged. The reign of God is near and already among us. And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.