

Human beings like to rank things. For example, there is a list of the top 25 college football teams that comes out every week. And especially when the college football playoff approaches, college football analysts debate about which teams deserve to be ranked higher and which teams are overrated. Human beings like to rank things. And that's just fine when it comes to sports, but our sinful nature always wants to be better than others not just in sports but in everything else too. Our sinful nature is always looking around us to see where we rank in comparison to other people. In our Gospel for today the disciples were doing that very thing. They were arguing about who was the greatest. And so Jesus had to teach them that in the kingdom of God "Greatness Means Humble Service to All."

Our Gospel says, "**They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, 'What were you arguing about on the road?'**" (Mark 8:33) The disciples were silent because they were ashamed about what they had been talking about, "**But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest**" (Mark 8:34).

The disciples actually had this argument about who was the greatest multiple times. It even came up on the night of the Lord's Supper. Luke's gospel tells us that on the night of the Lord's Supper, "**A dispute also arose among them as to which of them was to be considered the greatest**" (Luke 22:24).

When college football analysts debate which team is better, they have a bunch of reasons why this team should be considered better. This team has a harder schedule. This team has defeated more ranked opponents. This team plays in a more difficult conference. Well, just like college football analysts have a bunch of reasons why one team should be considered better than another, the disciples I'm sure each had their own reasons for why they should be considered the greatest.

In the Gospel last week Jesus said to Peter, "**You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.**" (Mark 8:33) By arguing about who was the greatest, the disciples were showing just how true that statement really was. They had in mind human concerns and not the concerns of God.

But in his grace Jesus teaches them what the kingdom of God is like. It says, "**Sitting down.**" (Mark 9:35) Today teachers usually stand when they teach. Back then rabbis or teachers usually sat down when they taught. Jesus sat down to teach his disciples about the kingdom of God. He says, "**Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all.**" (Mark 8:35) What's considered great in the kingdom of God is humble service.

And to illustrate this truth Jesus points to a little child. It says, "**He took a child whom he placed among them**" (Mark 9:36). Imagine that you gave each one of the twelve disciples a piece of paper and you told them rank from 1 to 12 the top ranking members in the kingdom of God. Of course they would have listed the twelve disciples themselves and Peter's list would have had Peter at the top and John's list would have had John at the top. Where would this little child have fit in any of their lists? He would have been unranked, right? He wouldn't have made the list.

When Jesus took this little child and placed this little child in front of them Jesus was making two important points. The first point is that the disciples should become like this little child. That's comes out more clearly in Matthew's Gospel. In Matthew 18 it says, "**He called a little child to him, and placed the child among them. And he said, 'Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.'**" (Matt 18:2-3) How should the disciples become like little children? Certainly they should have the faith and trust of little children. Also they should take the low rank and status of little children.

Our society rightly gives a very high importance to children. And so it might seem strange to us that in ancient society children were seen as having a very low rank and status. And so when Jesus says become like little

children he is saying, "Take a place of very low rank and status." Now Jesus is talking about an attitude of the heart. You might be in a high ranking position at work and that's good but Jesus wants you to have the attitude of someone who humbly serves.

Now what possible motivation could we have for taking a place very low rank and status? Well, part of it is recognizing that we are sinful and because we're sinful we don't deserve to be puffed up with pride. Also, there was one person who took on himself the lowest status of all, a status so low that he submitted to death by crucifixion. And by doing that he paid for your sins and mine. Jesus took the lowest status of all when he died on the cross for your sins and mine. Jesus became the humble servant of all when he died on the cross for the sins of the world. Jesus talks about that in our Gospel for today, he says to his disciples, **"The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men. They will kill him and after three days he will rise."** (Mark 9:31) There was another time when James and John came to Jesus asking for high positions in the kingdom and Jesus responded by saying, **"Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many."** (Mark 10:43-45)

When we see Jesus take a place of very low rank and status, that motivates *us* to take a place of very low status as well. If we take a very low status that means that we will be very humble and willing to serve. What humble service can we do around the house and at work and at church? Greatness in the kingdom of God means humble service. So the first point that Jesus is making by putting a little child in the midst of them is that we should become like a child by taking a very low status.

The second point that Jesus is making by putting the little child among them is that he wants us to serve *all*, even those who are not very important in the world's eyes. The child here represents all who are lowly in the eyes of the world.

Notice that Jesus put the child in the middle of all of them. **"He took a child whom he placed among them"** (Mark 9:36). He put the child in the very center of all of them. Who are the people that we don't notice because they don't seem to be very important in the eyes of the world? Those are the people that Jesus wants to put in the very center of our attention. Jesus had a brother named James. James the brother of Jesus wrote our second lesson for today. In that same letter James also wrote this: **"Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in filthy old clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, 'Here's a good seat for you,' but say to the poor man, 'You stand there' or 'Sit on the floor by my feet,' have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my dear brothers and sisters, has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised to those who love him?"** (James 2:2-5)

By taking the little child and putting him in the midst of the disciples Jesus was taking those who are lowly and putting them right at the center of our attention and saying, "Notice them, welcome them, serve them, and when you serve them you're serving me." **"Taking the child in his arms, he said to them, 'Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me.'"** (Mark 9:36-37) Greatness in the kingdom of God means humble service to all, even to and especially to those who are lowly in the eyes of the world. Jesus took the lowest place and served us by dying for our sins on the cross. So let's lay aside our pride, take a low status and be humble servants to all. Amen.