"Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer." You may be seated.

Good morning sisters and brothers. I am happy to be worshipping with you today. Today's readings put me in mind of the abundance of God's Kingdom. Such abundance is beyond what human beings can imagine. God generously invites everyone to his table and is not partial to one group over another. **God does not have favorites.**

Everybody knows what it means to play favorites – even young children. I'll give you an example. I remember being in the car once years ago with my sister and her three kids on the way to a restaurant. Her youngest, her only son, asked from the back seat of the car, "Mommy. Am I your favorite?" Of course, my sister said, "No. I love all of my children equally." But, her two daughters strongly protested. They believed that their little brother was indeed my sister's favorite.

We all want to be the favorite – the special person who gets special treatment. As human beings, we routinely compare ourselves to one another and judge who is better or worse. We create categories of people and set up a kind of ladder from most respected down to the least respected. We decide which groups of people matter most. We have

hierarchies, class systems, and social pecking orders. And these often determine how we treat people. In short, we play favorites.

In our epistle this morning, James tells Christians NOT to play favorites – not to show partiality. He goes as far as to say that making distinctions between people, judging them, and then treating them differently is a sin! James uses the example of favoring the rich over the poor, but there are many ways that we can give preferential treatment to some and belittle others.

It can be all too easy for a teacher to favor the brightest student in the class or for an employer to promote a worker who shares the same ethnic background. Showing no partiality is a real challenge.

In our gospel story today, Jesus is directly confronted with this challenge. As he is traveling in Gentile territory, trying to be inconspicuous, a Syrophoenician woman throws herself at his feet. She has heard about Jesus' miracles, so she begs him to cast a demon out of her daughter.

Now this woman oversteps social boundaries in approaching Jesus. First, she is not Hebrew. She is considered *impure* because she does not live according to Jewish law. Secondly, she is Syrophoenician. That means that she comes from Phoenicia – a part of the Roman province of Syria. She is likely a descendant of the ancient enemies of Israel.

Jesus responds to her harshly, saying, “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” Comparing this woman to a dog is an insulting way of saying that she and her daughter are not worthy of healing – certainly not as worthy as the children of Israel.

Scholars disagree about the meaning of Jesus’ behavior. I believe we see here the human side of Jesus. His first reaction is to view the Syrophoenician woman as the “other” and to judge her. He’s not comfortable with her plea because she’s an outsider. She’s not part of his tribe. But, after hearing her reasonable response, Jesus changes his mind.

The woman says, “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” She reminds Jesus that there is no need to be partial – to favor the children of Israel when there is more than enough food to go around, or in this case, enough grace to heal both Hebrews and Gentiles. Jesus realizes that God’s healing power is too great to be limited – to be constrained by ethnic, cultural, or religious differences. He removes the demon from the afflicted child.

The Syrophoenician woman helps Jesus see that his mission is broad. God has sent him to minister to everyone – not just the Jewish people. God bestows his blessings without discrimination. **God does not have favorites**.

As Christians, we learn from Jesus to embrace the outsider, the stranger, and even the enemy. Let's ask ourselves, "Who are the people we consider 'others' today?" Are they the homeless, those of a different race, LGBTQ people, Muslims, immigrants, people who are incarcerated? Which group are we most likely to judge?

Many years ago, at a different church, I was involved in an initiative to buy and deliver simple Christmas gifts to men in a Maryland State prison. My son was four years old at the time. One day, his pre-school teacher pulled me aside to tell me that he was upset. He had confided to her that I was going to see people in jail and he didn't understand. Weren't these bad people? He wondered why his mom was giving them presents.

I told my son's teacher that I would talk with him and ease his mind. But, I detected a note of judgment in her tone – as if she thought I should stop visiting the prison. Maybe she disapproved of my actions. Even as adults, some people react negatively to the thought of interacting with people who are incarcerated.

How much easier it is to stick with what's comfortable. We can dismiss the outsiders in the world and give preferential treatment to those we consider more deserving. But, that's not what following Jesus is all about.

Following Jesus is about expanding our notion of who is valuable and who belongs in the Kingdom of God.

When we reach out to those we don't perceive as being like us, when we open ourselves to people whose views or customs are different, we demonstrate our belief in the magnitude of God's love and the abundance of God's Kingdom. **God does not have favorites.** Why should we?

Amen