**15 Pentecost. Proverbs 22, Ps 125, James 2:1-17; Mark 7:24-37; Rev. Mary S. Trainor**

"I know she is your favorite, isn't she?" This question is being asked a lot this week, as it is the first week of school. One of the common things that happens in school, both to teachers and students, is the issue of favorites. Favoritism is the giving preference to one person over others with equal claims. We all remember teachers who treated a certain student way better than other students, and we remember the popular kids and the dweebs who people ridiculed. Oh, here in America we espouse that we are a nation of equality for all -- but let's face it, there is bias, there are favorites. It's not just in school either, it is everywhere.

Historically there has been major bias documented in areas such as housing, hiring, and clubs - and there are now laws in place to prevent blatant discrimination. Yet, bias is a reality. Recent psychology studies have shown a well documented unconscious bias in hiring: they found that certain applicants were eliminated just on the basis of their names or their age or their addresses or their looks! It is difficult to avoid showing favoritism. We tend to form judgments based on personal criteria. It is a problem in our 21st century culture, and it was a problem back in the 1st century too. Paul tells us in Romans 2:11 that, "***God does not show favoritism***." Ephesians 6:9 says, "***All are equal with Him.***" So we are to see others as God sees them. As today's Proverbs reading said, "***The rich and the poor have this in common: the Lord is the maker of them all***." All people are children of God, all are loved the same by God. God loves us all the same, and so we are to treat all others equally, as God's beloved children. In today's reading from James, we heard,  ***"You shall love your neighbor as yourself. But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted ...as transgressors***." So showing favorites is actually a sin!

In our Gospel, we see Jesus healing two people. These two people were anything but favorites back them, as the deaf man represents the marginalized by his handicap, and the Syrophoenician woman by her race, unclean spirit in her daughter, and her gender. And what did Jesus do? Did He do like people in that culture did, avoid them? No, He came to them, directly interacted with them face-to-face, touched, and healed. The definition of the sacraments, that you will find on p. 857 in the BCP, is " **outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace, given by Christ as sure and certain means by which we receive that grace**." In Baptism, the outward and visible signs are oil and water. In Holy Eucharist, the outward and visible signs are bread and wine. These outward signs help us experience the reality of God, which is especially important today in our culture full of skeptics. In today's Gospel we see three outward and visible signs of Jesus' healing presence: spittle, touch, presence. Jesus prayed and the woman "***went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone."*** And the man: "***immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly***." We are then told that the people watching "***were astounded beyond measure***." These signs, along with the inward and spiritual grace, were given to people who were marginalized, people who the bias was against, people who were not favorites.

This past week is the 10th anniversary of Hurricane Katrina. One post-Katrina story I heard was from a woman who is about my age whose job was as a human resources professional for the city of New Orleans, but whose home (in the lower 9th ward) was destroyed. She, and her daughter and two grandchildren, were evacuated to Texas. Because her bank had closed and the money from FEMA ran out after a couple of months, they ended up homeless in Texas. She reported that in desperation, because her grandchildren were without food and she had to scrape and reuse diapers, she resorted to begging. At the door of a K-Mart, while living in their car, she asked people who came by for food and diapers. It was humiliating, but she had to do something! She reported that before this experience, this she had always looked down her nose at people who begged; she never helped them out, because she thought they were lazy. After this experience, she realized how it feels to be desperately poor and she spoke with such gratitude about those who helped them. She was able to go back to her job, but she reported that things are still tough in New Orleans. Jesus' power made manifest in the two healings today reveal to us God's power to restore us, God's power to lift up the poor and sick, God's power to transform us to do His work in the world. Jesus took the deaf man aside and responded to the desperate mother, and He takes us aside and responds to us too.....right here in this church, today. Jesus is right here, and when you reach out your hands to receive Holy Communion Jesus is really present for you, revealed, empowering, embolding. Because Jesus is fully present for us, transforming and restoring us, we can live out our faith - no matter how difficult that might be.

Today is the day that has been set aside by many churches throughout our nation, including our own Episcopal Church, as "**Confession, Repentance, and Commitment to end Racism Sunday.**" It is a day for us to ponder our own biases, and where our blind spots are that keep us from seeing others as God sees them, from treating others as God would have us treat them. It is a day to ponder the reality of Jesus in the midst of our daily challenges, giving us outward and visible signs as well as inward grace. In your pews, you will find a letter from the Presiding Bishop and the House of Deputies on this subject.

Let us pray together one of the prayer our denomination recommends we pray on this day. It is at the bottom of the letter (or at the bottom of page 823 in the BCP): "**Grant, O God, that your holy and life-giving Spirit may so move every human heart [and especially the hearts of the people of this land], that barriers which divide us may crumble, suspicions disappear, and hatreds cease; that our divisions being healed, we may live in justice and peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."**