

Homily based on the readings from May 5, 2024 (Acts 10.25-26, 34-35, 44-48; 1 John 4.7-10; John 15.9-17)

Most of us here today, at some point in our lives, have probably experienced some form of sibling rivalry. Even people who grew up without brothers or sisters most likely clashed with somebody else they knew – a cousin, a neighbor, a family friend. To a certain extent, these conflicts arise from the inevitable tensions of childhood and adolescence, but there is often a deeper motivation – one that many of us may not even recognize. At a basic level, most young people crave the love and affection of their parents – or whoever is serving as their primary caregiver. Whether fairly or not, other children in the household are often perceived as *competitors* for that attention.

Because the Bible delves into all aspects of the human experience, it is not surprising that it contains numerous accounts of sibling rivalries: Jacob and Esau, Leah and Rachel, Joseph and his brothers, and – of course, the most dreadful example of all – Cain and Abel. In one way or

another, all of these conflicts arise from individuals competing for someone else's affection. Some of these rivalries – such as the dispute between Joseph and his brothers – end with reconciliation and redemption. Many other conflicts, though, are never fully resolved – and even get passed down from one generation to the next. For example, the longstanding feud between the Israelites and the Edomites was largely a continuation of the hostility between their forefathers Jacob and Esau. Along similar lines, one could even say that the discord in the *modern* Middle East is an outgrowth of the ancient animosity between the brothers Isaac and Ishmael.

Unfortunately, this sort of rivalry often carries through to people's spiritual lives. As individuals, we might worry that the love *God* has for other people will somehow diminish the love he has for us. As groups, we are often tempted to set ourselves above others – to represent ourselves as being *God's favorites*. Any such inclination is *deeply* misguided. The plain fact is that, while some people certainly have a

closer connection with God than others, our Heavenly Father loves all of his children *equally* and *infinitely*.

The Old Testament, as we know, primarily focuses on the relationship between God and the Children of Israel. Over the course of 46 books, we see the establishment of multiple covenants, witness repeated deliverances from oppression, and encounter prophecies of future redemption. Nevertheless, it is also clear that God does not withhold his love from the *rest* of his children. This balance is evident even in today's psalm:

He has remembered his kindness and his faithfulness
toward the house of Israel. All the ends of the earth have seen
the salvation by our God.

Just as a human parent cannot pick a favorite child, God's devotion to Israel does not lessen his love for the whole of humanity.

Nevertheless, even during the early days of the Church, there was a common belief that God's love and mercy were uniquely reserved for the Children of Israel. What we see in today's first reading is the full recognition – on the part of Saint Peter and his followers – that the saving power of Jesus Christ cannot be restricted to a single group of people. In response to the prophetic witness of Cornelius, a Roman centurion, Peter declares that full membership in the Church must be offered to the Gentiles as well as the Jews:

In truth, I see that God shows no partiality.

Rather, in every nation whoever fears him and acts uprightly
is acceptable to him.

In other words, there is no place for sibling rivalry among the children of God.

The love we all receive from God comes with both a *lesson* and an *obligation*. The *lesson* is that *all* love originates with God. As we heard in today's Epistle:

In this is love:

not that *we* have loved God, but that *he* loved us.

Our *obligation*, as children of God, is to *absorb* that love and to *radiate* it throughout the world:

Beloved, let us love one another,

because love is of God;

everyone who loves is begotten by God and knows God.

This *responsibility* is stated even more succinctly in today's Gospel:

“This I command you: love one another.” Just as Christ laid down his life for *each* and for *every* human being, we too must *selflessly* embrace all of our brothers and sisters – regardless of what tribe, language, people, or nation they represent. The love of God is *inexhaustible*. The only way it will *ever* run short is if *we* refuse to share it.