

**SIBLING RIVALRY**  
*Sermon for Pentecost 15A-Mt 20:1-16*  
LPC, 9/21/14

Before our children were born, Rich and I vowed that we would be fair parents. If God blessed us with multiple children, we were going to treat them exactly the same, so that they would be happy and well-adjusted and absolutely free from any cause for sibling rivalry.

That worked well. Not.

It may be different for twins, but it's probably inevitable that the younger child will envy the privileges afforded the elder siblings, while the older ones will suspect that the junior are spoiled and treated more indulgently than they were. And they're probably right. By the time the second or third child comes along, parents have learned which rules are worth pressing and which can be left to slide. This is called the "Which ditch do you want to die in?" phenomenon.

In our own family, the situation was aggravated by the disparate personalities of our two children. They simply could not be disciplined the same way. Toby, like many eldests, felt responsible for the moods of his parents. A word, or sometimes a look, would be enough to discipline him, and then he would feel bad for his transgression. Ben required a much firmer hand. So much for treating our children exactly the same!

We loved them both equally, but not the same, because they were not the same. And of course the jealousies developed and occasionally erupted. Despite parents' best efforts, sibling rivalry happens. Families are families.

As you know if you been here the past couple of weeks, I've been preaching a lot about families, as we have been reading from this final teaching passage from the Gospel of Matthew. I've said that family is the model to which Christians are called in their interpersonal relations. I've preached about forgiveness, because that's what families do. Today we hear more about families.

Of course, on the surface, the parable Jesus tells is not about families but about hired workers. The workers who have worked more expect more pay than the workers who have worked only a few hours. But of course this isn't just a story about field hands. It's about God, and God's relationship with God's people, who come to God in different ways. Some come to God early in life and stay loyal. And some take a long and circuitous route to find their way to God.

Since God's relationship with people is a family relationship, this parable about field hands is really a family story, and a tale of sibling rivalry. The ones who have come first resent that the latecomers receive the same love. Sound familiar?

I know all about sibling rivalry not only as a parent but as the youngest of three children. My sister, who was next oldest, and I had some great fights, And then, one day, we were friends. Best friends. Today there is nothing I wouldn't do for my sister or my brother. What happened?

Simply put, we grew up. We had always been confident of our parents' love, but in maturity we came to really realize that that love couldn't run out. We came to realize that our parents' love and favor toward our siblings did not mean that there would be less for us. In other words, we developed an understanding that our parents were not dispensers of favors but dependable sources of love. Sometimes one of us needs more attention than the others. That's OK. Each of us still gets all the love we need.

Secondly, we came to appreciate our differences. My brother is methodical, analytical, and responsible. My sister is creative, spontaneous, and plugged-in. I'm all of the above and none of the above. Our parents responded to us as each of us needed given our unique personalities and situations. This resulted, occasionally, in unequal treatment, but never in unequal love. Today we are able recognize and celebrate our differences.

As this has happened we have also come to appreciate what we have in common, particularly our shared history. The best thing about having a sibling is that there is at least one other person in the world who understands just how really weird your family was. When my family gets together all one of us has to do is make a shorthand reference to "The Cape Cod Picture," "The night we broke the bed," and we all grin. Our common history means we have a place we belong.

Finally, we have supported each other through good times and bad. Significantly, my sister and I became friends when we were away at school together. We were far away from the familiar comforts of home, and we instinctively turned to each other.

These life lessons can be applied to our efforts to extend our understanding of family into our relationships in the world, as I think God wills for us to do. First, we can trust that there is enough of God's love to go around. Second, we can appreciate that we are different, and that God has different plans for each of us, but that God loves us all equally. Third, we can recognize our common heritage as God's sons and daughters. As Bp. Tutu says, "We are all one family." Finally, we can support each other through good times and bad.

In the kingdom of heaven, which we are trying to help God build on earth, there is no place, and no need, for jealousy. God loves us all. If you're driving along the highway in a car with a full tank, you don't feel envy for a tanker full of gasoline because that driver has more than you. You don't even think about it. The two vehicles have different needs for gas and different functions, and besides, you have enough for your own needs.

Of course, the difference between God's love and gasoline is that gas runs out and God's love never runs out. There is enough of God's love for us to share, and there always will be. If we find ourselves comparing what God has given us versus what other people have, we need to grow up, trust God's love, appreciate both our differences and our common heritage, and support each other. There is always enough of God's love.