

The God Who Runs
Luke 15:11-32

It seems that rejection is a normal part of life. I suppose we've all gotten those "We regret to inform you" letters from colleges or employers to whom we have applied. Or maybe that fraternity or sorority which you thought was so neat apparently didn't have the same opinion of you after rush week. And there are always those "Sorry, I have to wash my hair" comments that leave you no doubt where you stand on a certain someone's list of priorities.

But what would you do if your own child rejected you? That is exactly what this younger son has done to his father. How horrible to ask for his inheritance while his father is still living! To do such a thing is really saying, "I wish you were dead." He's saying, "I don't want to be around you anymore. Just give me your stuff, and I'm outta here." Could there be any greater sort of callousness?

And can anyone blame the older brother for his reaction? When his father comes to tell him that this no-good deadbeat has come home, he can only call him "This thy son," not "this my brother." The emotional breach between this son and the man who doubtless used to be his worshipful little brother is complete.

And for good reason. For the older son points out to his father that this no-account "has devoured your living," your livelihood. Remember, the father probably had to liquidate a not insubstantial part of his assets in order to fulfill his younger son's request. And since this father has only two sons and the oldest was to receive a double portion, that means he has given 1/3 of everything he has to his youngest.

How would your lifestyle change if you suddenly had to divest yourself of 1/3 of your net worth? Would you have to sell your business? Would you have to sell your home? And if you were a farmer, what would be the effect on your crops with 1/3 less land? How long would it take for your herds to be restored if 1/3 of your breeding stock was suddenly gone? No, this younger son has severely damaged his father's standard of living.

But the older son can't excuse his little brother's callousness by saying that he just made some bad investments. No, this punk took the money and ran – and then he blew it all, pumping slot machines at the boat, boozing it up in bars, and paying off prostitutes and pushers.

And all of this has, no doubt, brought scandal on the family. You know how people talk. No matter how hard the loyal, faithful, older son has worked, tending to the family's reduced holdings, what have the neighbors been saying? "Hmm. His father must have spoiled that younger son. Or maybe it's just the way that family is." And perhaps those gossips have wondered whether it is safe to trust anyone else in the family, either.

No, this older brother has had to stand by and watch his younger brother impoverish his father and ruin his father's reputation and break his father's heart. And as far as he knows, this ne'er-do-well has only come home to kiss up to the old man so he can wheedle some more dough out of him and go off to blow it again. Would any of us blame the older son for his anger? Would any of us go into the feast?

We should, if we remember that we are all actually standing in the place of the younger son. No, perhaps we haven't been guilty of the particular sort of "riotous living" that this young man has been so involved in. But which of us can honestly say with the older son that we have never transgressed the commandments of God? Which of us can say that we have never strayed from our Father's side? Which of us have been truly loyal to our Heavenly Father with all our heart and all our soul?

No, we may not have flat-out told God that all we want is His stuff, but don't we all tend to care more for the gifts than the giver? Don't our prayers tend to be focused on things that we want rather than the things that would glorify God?

Put it this way. If our prayers were letters to God, how many of them would read, "Dear Dad, please send money?" And how many would read like Father's Day cards: "Dear Dad, I want to thank you, just for being my Dad. I think you're great?"

And, if we are really honest with ourselves, haven't we spent more time this past week on the pleasures of the flesh than we've spent with God? No, we may not have been visiting the brothels in Las Vegas or the strip clubs in New Orleans, but haven't we been more concerned with the bread on our tables than with the Bread of Life? Haven't we put more effort into our exercise and our diet than into our prayers? Haven't we been more consumed with our jobs or our families than we have with God and His kingdom? Haven't we gotten more of our ideas from the mass media than from the Holy Scriptures, the Word of God?

No, the sad fact is that whenever we do any of these things, whenever we sin in any way, we are pulling away from God, and thus we are doing exactly what that younger son did – saying to God, "Give me your stuff – life and breath and health and wealth and whatever else I ask for – and then let me go and do what I want. I really don't want to see you anymore – not until I need something."

Now, we didn't blame the older son for his attitude toward his sorry little brother. So would we really blame God if He just let all of us have what we want? Would God be unjust if He were to say, "Fine. You can take all that I have given you, and enjoy all the worldly pleasures you want right now. You can live your life as though I don't matter. But if you don't want to be with me, if you don't want to live in the warmth and light of My presence, then you will end up in the outer darkness, a place where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth."

And sometimes God does let us experience some of the consequences of our sin. That's what happened to this younger son, isn't it? For a Jewish man to have to feed pigs was bad enough. But for anyone to look longingly on the slop buckets he carries to the hogs, well, that's about as low as you can go.

Yes, God often lets us see just how bad our sin is, but He only does this so that we might come to our senses, turning away from our selfish sins, turning away from all the stuff we have and all the stuff we think we need and turning back to the One Who gave us all we are and who gives us all we have.

But the good news is that no matter how bad our sins may have been, God isn't like that older son. God doesn't respond to rejection and heartbreak the way that we would. No, God is more like the Father in this story. For this Father doesn't even wait for his wayward son to come home. This father runs to meet his son.

Now, it's hard for us to imagine what this image would have conveyed in Jesus' time. For an old man to pick up his long robes and run anywhere would be a ridiculous sight. But for a father to lose his dignity in running towards his son, why that overturned all the social conventions of the day. It was the children who were supposed to approach their parents, and they were to come to their fathers with great reverence and respect. So this sort of behavior was quite simply unheard of. It just wasn't done.

But this father doesn't care about his dignity. He doesn't care what other people might think. Instead he runs and grabs his wayward son and holds him close and kisses him.

And you know what? That's what God did to us in Jesus Christ. In spite of our sins, God ran to meet us. He didn't stay up in Heaven, aloof from our sin and suffering. He didn't just tell us to climb back into Heaven by our own efforts at holiness.

No, Christ came to be God with us, to share our sorrows, to understand our pain, to enter into our suffering. And He didn't even wait for His people to ask Him to die for them. He went to the cross while they were still rejecting Him, while they were still denying Him.

And just as this old man with the flapping robes became an object of ridicule, abandoning his dignity, throwing away the honor that he as a father deserved, so did Christ. He took upon Himself the death penalty we so richly deserved. The King of Kings was treated as a common criminal, so that all of us convicts might walk out of prison, so that we might be free, so that we might be accepted again into God's family.

And how great, how boundless is God's acceptance of us! When this sorry, no-account, good-for-nothing son who has caused his father such pain and heartache barely begins his words of repentance, the father brings out the best robe for him. Now, this was a special mark of

distinction, for in those days folks didn't have as many outfits as there are days in the year. This is probably the robe that that the father himself always wore on special occasions.

But he goes further. The father puts a ring on his son's hand, the unclean hand that had so recently been feeding pigs. This ring was a mark of authority. And the father puts sandals on his son's feet. This was a mark of freedom, as slaves went without shoes.

And to top it all off, the father orders the fatted calf to be slaughtered, the one that has been fattened up for a great occasion. There will be feasting and rejoicing tonight in this father's house. For his son who was as good as dead has come back to life again!

Can we even begin to comprehend such love, such grace? For the amazing good news is that when God runs to meet us, God clothes us not with just a fine robe, but with the righteousness of Christ. And the ring of authority He gives us is a promise that we will reign with Him, judging even the angels. He recognizes us as sons, not just with shoes, but with freedom from the power of sin, and with the incredible privilege of entering into His presence in prayer, of climbing up into His lap and calling Him "Abba," papa.

But best of all, He rejoices over each and every one of us who is saved. Whenever one who was lost is found, God's heart that is broken by our sin rejoices over us with singing.

But why? Why should God rejoice so over lost sheep? Why would Christ go to the cross for ungrateful sinners like us? For the same reason that this father hugged his son's neck and kissed him – because he loves us. The amazing good news is that God loves, and loves in such an extravagant way, the very ones who have preferred the gifts to the giver, the ones who have done nothing but run away from Him, the ones who have rejected Him, the ones who have betrayed Him. It's people like this wayward son, it's people like us that God calls, "My beloved children."

How can we respond to such grace and mercy? We may not be able to understand it, but should we not at least accept it? Should we not accept the One who has run out to meet us with such joy? Should we not accept His welcome and His pardon, drawing near to the One Who has drawn near to us, to the One who loves us so and Who has proven His love at so great a cost?