



# ST. MARK'S ON THE CAMPUS

## Episcopal Church

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The Rev. Gretchen Naugle

Sermon for the Fourth Sunday of Lent

St. Mark's on the Campus

March 18, 2007

Joshua 5:9-12; Psalm 32; II Corinthians 4:16-21; Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

IN THE NAME OF GOD – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. *Amen*

**W**HEN FR. JERRY ASKED me about a month ago to preach the sermon this morning, I was delighted to have the opportunity to be "up front" here at St. Mark's once again. Some of you may recall that it was at this time just about three years ago that I began serving as your interim Rector.

For me, in some ways that seems like a long time ago—and yet in other ways not very long at all. I so enjoyed those special 16 months with you—especially being a part of the search process which resulted in calling Fr. Jerry to be your Rector. Since then a number of great things have happened here at St. Mark's – including Sidnie moving from a singer in the choir loft to being "up front" to the altar as a celebrant!

As some of you already know, for most of the year 2006 I served as the interim rector with the Homestead Cluster— the three Episcopal churches in Beatrice, Wymore, and Fairbury—and during that time I made many new friends and had some great experiences. Then since last November I have again been so blessed to be with all of you "my beloved St. Martians" once again sitting next to my husband each week in our favorite pew—and so today is indeed a special treat for me and I hope for you, too.

When I first read the lessons for today I realized right away that since our lectionary follows a 3-year cycle these were indeed the same ones I preached to you in my early days as your interim--and very likely I already had a sermon filed neatly away in a purple folder (purple because it is Lent) carefully labeled "The Fourth Sunday in Lent"!

Yet you and I are all bright enough to know that time moves on and we are not the same people as we were three years ago--either individually or collectively. And since today's Gospel is clearly one of the top 10 of the well-known parables that Jesus told -- we need to take a fresh look TODAY at what it is we are to learn from this familiar story.

Our Gospel is usually referred to as the story of the Prodigal Son--because at first glance its main character seems to be the younger son--the one who claims his fortune and leaves home--only to return after a period of high living--after he has spent all of his wealth. So all the action appears to focus on the wayward ways of this young man--and his later realization that home was indeed a good place to be and his return to that place-- hence the title the prodigal son.

Now each and every time we read or hear a story we usually find ourselves identifying with one or more of the main characters. And in this story there are three possibilities--

- the younger son, of course
- the father or parent who provides the youngest child the financial means to leave home and yet is there to welcome him when he returns
- the oldest son with whom we identify most--the big brother the one who has never left home and family, and therefore the one becomes somewhat disgruntled when his kid brother returns to a warm welcome after a time of wild living.

Now each one of the characters has an important role to play in this Gospel story -- just as in any family unit or any other gathering of people or especially a faith community, such as St. Mark's. We all have our distinct and unique roles to fulfill in order to make the story of our life together both healthy and productive.

The actions of the younger son are clearly what form the core of this story – yet without the words and actions of the parent and the other sibling, there would be no significant message to share. We all know that when Jesus tells a story or parable it is not just as an account of a happening, but as a means to convey a message – and in this parable it takes all 3 of the characters to do just that – both to tell the story and convey the message that Jesus wants us both to hear and to remember.

So then the question becomes – what IS that message? One way of searching out that answer is to once again consider -- which of the three characters do we identify with the most? Is it the younger child who clearly gets the most space in the story –since both his words and his actions are the most dramatic. And many of us have done or will do similar things in our lives.

Many years ago Ron and I moved to Lincoln--many miles away from our families and all we had ever known or experienced and likewise, our own daughter chose to go to college and then take a job an equal number of miles away from us and where she had grown up – although by means of cell phones and airplanes as loving and supportive parents and children, we stay in close communication with her as well as the rest of our family members.

Then there is the oldest child in our Gospel today--the good kid in the family or so it seems. And usually I tend to connect most with the older brother since I am the oldest of three daughters and it seems that I have always had to be the one to teach our parents how to be parents in all kinds of ways. I was the first to date and to have a romantic relationship; the first to learn how to drive; the first to leave home and go to college; and even the first to be married. And then in recent years I was asked to serve as the executor of my parents' estates and to carry out their last wishes--so being the oldest child never ends, it seems!

And yet I know very well as do all of you how essential it is to have all three personalities in any family or group of people, including at St. Mark's, so we can be a supportive, strong, and loving community of faith. And also how each one of us will likely find ourselves being a different character in this story at a particular time or when a special need arises.

Some of you are truly the stable constant force that the older brother displays and others of you are the parent person who provide the means to make something new and different happen. You support and encourage creative actions – and as a parent , you are around to pick up the pieces when all doesn't work out precisely as planned.

Hopefully each one of us at certain times has been and will be the youngest child, the risk taker, as well- so we can dream some wild dreams or put forth some crazy idea to move beyond our comfortable and familiar way of doing things - or at the very least that we, in an emotional and spiritual sense, explore a new and exciting place to be in the days and weeks to come.

But there is one more piece to this story of the Prodigal Son – and that is the part that we can all participate in right now, today, no matter which character we identify with most closely – that is the party given in honor of the return of the youngest child. It is a party to which we are all invited since we all enjoy celebrating with others at appropriate times.

And that is what we are about each time we gather for worship - and most especially, each time we celebrate the Holy Eucharist. For this is the divine party to which God invites all of us to participate; to join with all of God's family coming together in this place, along with the rest of God's family around the world!

We have come together to be with our sisters and brothers in Christ. We have come together to learn what has been happening in one another's lives. We have come together to hear the stories of God's mighty acts – and most of all, we have come together to share in the Holy Eucharist - the holy meal that God in Jesus Christ has prepared for us and that we share with one another through the power of the Holy Spirit.

As baptized children of God and a vital part of God's family, we are all invited this day to "Come and eat together, for this is the Body and Blood our Lord – the one who died for our sins and rose again so that we might have life – life forever with him."

Amen