We are born into webs of trust so thick and near to us we can and do miss their significance for our very survival. The child cannot help but unconditionally trust others if he or she is to survive. But those whom the child trusts often have difficulty explaining why they want the unconditional trust a child demands. Trust, which comes in many different guises, may and can be justified or explained in some of its forms as a self-interested strategy. Yet trust, the trust we rely on for life itself, the trust we should like to have in ourselves, is so basic, so primitive, we cannot attribute it to self-interest. Trust it seems at the most basic level entails an unavoidable primordial openness to others.

Yet it is also true that we are born into webs of mistrust that threaten our survival. We cannot help but look away from the eyes of the orphan who has never been held. What horror could be more frightening than the child who has never experienced the touch of trust? Never touched these children become incapable of touching. We resist but cannot help but ask, “Are these children human?” No betrayal is more basic than the child whose isolation is so complete he or she is made incapable of the love trust makes possible.

Trust is like the air we breathe. We fail to notice that trust constitutes our lives until we sense its perversion or absence. Trust, for example, is essential to conversation because by speech we hand ourselves over to another in the hope of receiving from them a response. This is true even when we have a exchange with a stranger. We assume what a stranger says to us can be trusted unless they have given us reason not to trust them. We are determined to trust one another for if we did not we would not be able to get on with life. We are fated to trust and to be trusted.

The depth of emotion we feel when we have been betrayed is an indication of how deeply our lives depend on trust. We have to trust one another, but the trust that makes our lives possible also makes us vulnerable. Trust is basic but dangerous because there can be no trust without risk. For the hard truth is that trust, exactly because it is more fundamental than distrust, makes betrayal not only possible but likely. Even liars do not want to be lied to.

So we try to hedge our bets by trying to trust with reservation. Yet as creatures who desperately long to trust another and even ourselves without reservation we often abandon our self-protective strategies. If you do not believe that ask yourself why, in spite of your often justified mistrust of others, you continue to want to be trusted. For it is surely the case that one mark of a trustworthy person is their desire to be trusted. That is why, in spite of our reservations, we trust people who trust themselves sufficiently to want to assume positions of responsibility. We do so because we sense there is an essential connection between authority and trust.

There are, of course, times and circumstances we think it impossible to trust ourselves or others. Some, indeed many of us, try to protect ourselves from the disappointment bred by betrayal by making cynicism a way of life. But cynics are caught in a terrible dilemma because their cynicism reflects their desire to be a people of hope who at the very least can trust themselves. That is why you can never talk a cynic out of their cynicism by argument. Rather what defeats the cynic is the realization that attempts to make cynicism a way of life cannot be lived.

Even if we fail to acknowledge how fundamentally trust sustains our lives we find it difficult to see or even imagine this or any world devoid of trust. Try, for example, to imagine a world whose landscape is shaped entirely by distrust. Even that part of the world we call politics is hard to imagine without trust. Of course it is true that tyrants, whose name may well be “the people,” depend on their subjects not trusting one another. They do so because they understand that distrust is the breeding ground for the assumption that someone must rule if we are to survive a world where no one feels they can trust or be trusted by another. But even tyrants want to be trusted.

Such a world of distrust is well on display in the book of Esther. The drama of Esther takes place against the background of the Persian Empire dominated by King Ahasuerus. Ahasuerus’s decrees are the only law of the land. The only problem is Ahasuerus’s rule is so arbitrary he cannot even remember his own decrees.
It is not clear if his “forgetfulness” is calculated or not, but what is clear is that his arbitrariness insures that no one can be trusted which means that all power begins and ends with Ahasuerus.

Power so conceived must be displayed in order to reinforce the presumption that there is no limit to what the one possessing the power wishes to do. Ahasuerus, therefore, spends enormous resources and time giving banquets that seem to have no purpose other than making clear that those who come to the banquet are beholden to the king. That his power comes from the breeding ground of distrust is why his close advisors must be eunuchs who cannot desire to be king. Yet as is often the case the king is at the mercy of such advisors because he has made himself incompetent because he only knows what they tell him. Thus Ahasuerus is willing to let his high official, Haman, in an effort to eliminate all threats to Haman’s power, plan to execute Mordecai as well as to exterminate the Jews. Murder, it seems, is the natural outgrowth of the politics of distrust and betrayal.

The Jews’ only hope is Esther. Esther is an orphan who has been adopted by her uncle Mordecai. Her adoption may be the only act of trust in the book of Esther. Beautiful and sexual she has become Ahasuerus’s queen. But even the queen cannot appear before Ahasuerus without being summoned. To do so risks death unless the king touches her with his golden scepter. Esther appears before Ahasuerus, is touched by his scepter, and begs him to spare her and her people. Ahasuerus grants her request; Haman is hung on the gallows meant for Mordecai and Mordecai is given Haman’s position in the king’s court.

So we are left with a happy ending that Mordecai decrees should be remembered every year by the Jews at a set time. Why? Because by remembering this story the Jews are reminded of the time they triumphed over their enemies. Moreover, they are reminded of how they triumphed. Just as Mordecai trusted Esther to use her position of power to save her people, any Jew, regardless of political status, must embody Esther’s courage and willingness to set aside her privilege for the sake of the other. Jews must trust one another for such trust is quite literally necessary for survival.

By now you may well be wondering: what do these philosophical ramblings about trust as well as this strange story of how Esther saved the Jews have to do with Founder’s Day? I think the point quite simply is this: This is the day we are asked to keep trust with the trust that has made us Duke University. To be asked to remember our benefactors can be interpreted by cynics as but our way to perform a Ahasuerus-like banquet. But I think that interpretation would be a deep mistake betraying who we are as well as those we serve.

To keep trust with the trust that has made us, perhaps a university that is quite different than even James B. Duke and President Few imagined, is an obligation we dare not fail to meet. This university is an institution entrusted with the task of remembering the gifts that have made this world something other than the world of Ahasuerus. The university is after all the institution committed to giving the dead a voice.

In the indenture naming as well as providing for Duke University, Mr. Duke observed: “I recognize that education, when conducted along sane and practical, as opposed to dogmatic and theoretical lines, is, next to religion, the greatest civilizing influence.” Whatever one may think about how Mr. Duke understood the distinction between practical and theoretical reason, I think he was not wrong to insist that the university that keeps trust with trust not only is a civilizing institution but exemplifies what it means to be civil.

For the university to be so entrusted does not mean that every expectation of our founders must be met. To keep trust with the trust that made us Duke University means we can be no less courageous and imaginative than those that entrusted us to represent and continue the work of this university. Indeed one of the sure ways a trust is betrayed is by doing no more than meeting the letter of the law. It is our good fortune to have founders who saw that if the South was to free itself of slavery a university must exist capable of providing a future otherwise unimaginable. In a war weary world we dare not be any less imaginative.

I should like to think that the university, and Duke University in particular, is an alternative to that ultimate form of mistrust we call war. The university is, so to speak, a safe haven where it is possible to make articulate the conflicts inherent in our lives in the hope that through argument we may learn to trust one another. This commitment I take to be as true for the sciences as it is for the humanities. Just ask yourself how betrayed you felt when a scientist “cooked” his results. The university, and the world in which we find ourselves, depends on us to be people who trust one another to say what we take to be true. For, as odd as it may seem, truth honed from conflict can be an alternative to war.

I have not forgotten this is a sermon. Yet you may have noticed I have not mentioned the name of God. I have good precedent for that oversight. Esther is one of the few books of the Bible in which the name of God
does not appear. In Esther God does not miraculously appear to save the Jews. God seems to have left it up to the Jews, and in particular to Mordecai and Esther, to accomplish that task. Jews without wit for survival are surely a people in desperate trouble. But Esther is a book of wit for survival.

God, it seems, trusts his people. He even trusts his people to risk trusting themselves. He trusts his people to have in the canon of Scripture a book that tells a fascinating story with no indication that they have been made who they are by God's promise. Rather than spelling it out, it is the very witness of the Jews, and in particular of Esther and Mordecai, that makes clear God can be trusted to be God.

That God, the God who made heaven and earth, is praised by the psalmist because God's trustworthiness has made it possible for Israel to escape “like a bird from the fowlers' snare.” The Psalms were written and sung by a people who had to learn through the ages to live out of control. They learned to so live because they knew, often with knowledge painfully earned, that God can be trusted to be God. That trust made it possible for God's people, often under terrible threats, to continue to have children. With the birth of every child the Jews witness their conviction that their very existence is not a mistake. They have, moreover, a tradition of trust to pass on to every generation.

But this is a Christian chapel and this is a Christian pulpit. I am a Christian. Surely Christians must have something to say about the role of the university. I believe we do have something to say but it must be said very carefully. The university began as an expression of the Christian imagination. Christians had and continue to have a stake in universities even if we are no longer in control of universities like Duke that had a Christian foundation. But I think it was a mistake for Christians to think they could only trust universities they controlled.

Sam Wells identifies that time when Christians presumed control of the university as the prologue to a three-chapter story. The first chapter was the period early in the last century when the churches traded their theological identity to retain institutional influence. Chapter two is the period of significant social change in which there was a revolt against privilege and hierarchy which rendered Christian identity problematic, particularly in universities. We live in chapter three which Wells characterizes as a battleground that as yet does not have an undisputed narrative of its own.

At least one aspect that characterizes chapter three, according to Wells, is the Christian lamentation over the loss of “their universities.” Wells argues for Christians to indulge in such a lament is a mistake not only because there is no “going back,” but more important the presumption of control has robbed Christians of their ability to live by their wits. For Wells, if Christians can give up their desire to be in control, if Christians can learn to trust that God is here in the work of this university even when God's name is absent, we might discover again what it means to live as Christians whose very lives depend on our trust in a trustworthy Lord.

In our gospel lesson for today, the disciples ask Jesus what they should do about people who are casting out demons in the name of Jesus but who do not seem to be card carrying members of the Jesus movement. Jesus tells the disciples to let them alone because what they do in his name is of service to the kingdom. That seems like good advice for Christians at this time in the ongoing life of the university. Let us resist the temptation to secure our control of the university by tactics of fear, coercion or manipulation. Instead let us learn to live by our wits. To so live takes courage and requires that we trust in God and one another. Who knows? If Christians learn to live and think as a people who trust God to be God we may well discover we have something so interesting to say that our non-Christian university colleagues will be glad we exist because they can trust us to be a people of trust.