

Trust: A Jump into the Deep End

The Rev. Rick Morley

St. David's Episcopal Church, Wayne, PA

September 8, 2024

16th Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 18, Year B

Rev. Rick Morley:

Good morning.

Congregation:

Good morning.

Rev. Rick Morley:

It was late June 2002, I was maybe five or six weeks removed from my graduation from seminary, and I was maybe two or three weeks removed from my ordination to the transitional diaconate. And a few days prior, Karen and I had moved into our first church-provided home, the vicarage next door to the small rural church in the beautiful community in Western Maryland that I had been called to. We were in the vicarage, we were in the home, but I hadn't started work yet. We had just moved up from Georgia. I was in seminary in Atlanta, and so I needed to establish a bank account in the state of Maryland. And so Karen and I decided on this particular day, we were going to go and open that bank account.

So two things you need to know in background to the story. One is, that day for a while, and was it 20 minutes or was it two hours? It's hard to tell. But Karen and I had noticed that there was this sound, this rhythmic almost wheezing, this like... We're new to the home, we're new to the neighborhood. We didn't quite know the sounds of the area, and so we didn't pay it a whole lot of mind. Was it a piece of machinery? Was it a pump? Who knew?

The second thing was this was my first big boy job. It was my first job after having my master's and my first job in my new church career. And so I felt like when I went to go down to the bank to open this bank account that I should look professional, I shouldn't just go in my cargo shorts and my T-shirt. And so I went upstairs and I put on a pair of nice slacks and I put on a button-up shirt. I don't remember if I wore my clerical collar, although I was just ordained and I was practically sleeping in the thing, so I probably did. And I probably put on a nice pair of argyle socks and my new black shoes I had probably bought for my ordination and my new big boy job. And I was just about ready to go when I heard Karen yelling my name from outside, "Rick! Rick!"

And so I went bounding down the stairs and through the house and out the door and Karen had found the source of the sound. And it was a dog that had fallen into our neighbor's pool. And the poor thing seemed like it had been there for a while and it was huddled against the side of the pool with its snout just over the water line and very much in distress and breathing heavily. And so I sprang into action and I went into the enclosure and I went over to the side of the pool where the dog was to pick the dog up and to pull it out of the pool. But as soon as I approached the dog, I mean, the poor

thing was scared to death literally already. And I'm this big lumbering figure that the dog does not know. So what does the dog do? But the dog leaves the safety of the side of the pool and paddles to the deep end.

I really didn't think I had much time. And so without thinking too much, I kicked off my new shoes and I pulled off my Argyle socks and I took off my trousers. This is a salient point, you're going to want to hold onto that. And I jumped into the pool and I go over to the dog and I got the dog and I pulled the dog back and I heaved it up onto the side of the pool and Karen was there and Karen held onto the dog and comforted the dog. And we're telling the dog he's a good boy and he's going to be okay. And then I got out of the pool and I'm dripping wet obviously, and in a rather delicate state. And no sooner am I out of the pool than a woman comes running down the driveway towards us yelling the dog's name. I don't remember the dog's name. "Fido! Fido!"

And she sees us and she's so grateful and we tell her how we found the dog and she's so grateful and she tells us how old the dog was and it was old and that he was mostly blind and mostly deaf. And every once in a while he got out and I'm standing there still in my delicate state and feeling all the more delicate as the story goes on. And I'm waiting for her just to give a little break in the story so I can excuse myself and go get dried off and get some clothes on. And before that break happens, she just looks at me and she goes, "Are you the new minister?" I wanted to lie, but I said, "Yes." And she goes, "I'm one of your parishioners." So that is the story of how I met my first parishioner. We moved into the rectory about three weeks ago, and I just want you to know I have yet to publicly mortify myself, although there's plenty of time for that.

I want to talk about faith today. Our epistle lesson comes from the epistle of James. The author is known in the New Testament as James, the brother of the Lord. Outside of the New Testament, he is known as James of Jerusalem because it's very clear, especially in the Book of Acts that the person in charge of the Jerusalem Church after Jesus's death, Resurrection and Ascension is not Peter, it is James. When there is a big decision that needs to be made, everyone says their peace. And then everyone turns and looks at James and James tells them what to do.

It is this James who wrote this letter, we assume to this church in Jerusalem, and he has lots of things to say, but some of the things he has to say are about faith and some of those things he says about faith eventually become controversial, mostly after the Protestant Reformation. Martin Luther was not impressed with James' epistle at all. In fact, he calls the epistle of James "the epistle of straw" because for Martin Luther faith is not just the central thing, it is the only thing. "Sola fide," he would proclaim, by faith alone. And yet in today's lesson from James' epistle, he says, "Faith without works is dead." He couples something with faith. And so Martin Luther says "straw".

I don't think the problem is Martin Luther. I don't think the problem certainly isn't James. I think the problem is sometimes our understanding of what faith is. We can oftentimes, and again, especially after the Protestant Reformation equate faith and belief. We can see those even two words as interchangeable. I can say that I believe in God and I have faith in Jesus and I believe in the Holy Spirit and I have faith in grace and I can bounce back and forth using those two words and no one would bat an eye.

And yet belief is something that is located up here among the theological precepts and historical facts that happened throughout the scriptures and our Christian faith. I believe in God. I believe he was the creator. I believe in Jesus, I believe in his resurrection. Those things are up here. But in the New Testament, the word that is used in the Greek for faith also means trust. It's the common Greek word for trust. It's the word for how you have trust among those who are around you. And belief and trust are two different things. I think located in two sort of different parts even of our being.

Our family, we were in Paris earlier this summer and we went up the Eiffel Tower as one does. And we were on the first floor of the Eiffel Tower, which is 187 feet off the ground below. And there are sections of that floor where the floor itself is transparent, it's glass or polycarbonate or something. And you can walk out onto these pieces of transparent material and look straight down past your feet to the ground below and the little teeny tiny people who are walking below your feet. And I believed that it was safe. I believed that the engineers didn't use thin shoddy material when they engineered this interesting feature of the first floor of the Eiffel Tower. I believed that the underwriters and the insurers made sure that everything was safe. I got it up here, but every time I would walk out onto one of those pieces of flooring, my stomach would turn. It was like I understood, but in my gut I didn't trust.

Growing in a life of faith is growing in trust of God. And how many times have we not trusted in the presence and the goodness and the love of God? How many times have we been in a situation and although we didn't know how the situation itself would exactly turn out, how many times did we not trust that God was right with us? How many times have we not trusted that in the end somehow all would be okay? How many times like that dog have we left the safety of the shallow waters and swum into the deep and dangerous waters?

And it's not even just when things are going horrible in our life and we have to sort of trust that somehow it's all going to be okay, but it's also about trusting in the way of life that God has given us to live. God has told us again and again that love is the way, that grace is the way, that mercy is the way, that compassion is the way, that truth and justice are the way. But how many times have we said, "That sounds good, but not now."

In James' epistle lesson for today, he says, "Mercy triumphs over judgment." How many times have I trusted in my own judgment of a person or a situation or a whole group of people instead of trusting that that person or situation or group are actually beloved and held in the mercy of God? I trust in my own judgments far too much and in the mercy of God, far too little. Perhaps we all do.

So how do we grow in this kind of faith, this kind of faith that is trust? Well, I don't think it's overly complicated. I think we grow in our trust in God in the same way that we grow in trust with a friend or we grow in the trust of our marriage, or we might grow to trust our rector or our new congregation. It takes time, but not just the passage of time, but intentional time together. You need to go through good things together to know that that other person will be there to celebrate with you. You need to go through tough

times together to know that the other person will be there and has your back no matter what.

In life, it's messy. You also have to go through times of friction where someone hurts the other or someone disappoints the other and someone is able to say, "I am so sorry. I shouldn't have done that." And the other person is able to say, "Thank you for saying that and I forgive you and let's move on." It is through that kind of time together that we are able to grow in trust and it is that kind of time together that we are able to grow in our trust with God.

And that's part of what we do here. It's part of why we come here to worship every Sunday and to sing and to pray. It's why in the Episcopal Church, so much of our service is the reading of Scripture, reading of these stories and these words from these people who lived a long time ago, who saw the trustworthiness of God, that God was with us when we were in Egypt and God was with us when we needed saving and God was with us when He sent Jesus. Moses came to trust in God and David came to trust in God, and Mary came to trust in God. And if those people were able to do that a long time ago, perhaps we could do that today.

We get to hear the long track record that God has had with humanity and this creation so that we can know that this God is trustworthy. But we also probably realize that while this gathering is really good for that, one hour a week probably also doesn't cut it and that our faith journey, our trust journey with God is not something that we just do on Sunday mornings, but is something that we need to do every day, every good day, every bad day, every terrible day, remembering that God is by our side and on our side.

Imagine how my story at the beginning of the sermon would have gone differently if that dog and I did know each other, if I did know his name and he knew my voice like the back of his paw, and I had taken him for a walk and I had rolled around with him in the front yard and I had given him treats after treats after treats, perhaps when I went over to pull him out of the pool, he might not have swam into the deep waters. Imagine if I walked out onto transparent floor 187 feet above the ground every day, my stomach might stop turning.

It takes time and good time and time alone and time together, and I am deeply excited about taking that kind of time with you as rector and congregation, and yes, to build trust and relationships and friendships and things to laugh at, and things to cry at together, yes, but together to spend time with God, that we together might grow in our trust in God, that He is with us on good days and bad days, and that together we might grow in the kind of life that shows a trust in God, that follows the ways that this God wants us to live, that we together might experiment with ways that we could live in love and grace and mercy and joy and peace and forgiveness and service of others, and that we might do that in church and at men's breakfasts and at fall festivals, and at vestry meetings and very early morning phone calls with the rector's warden, that we would do that work together. That excites me. Is that something you're interested in?

Congregation:

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Yes.

Rev. Rick Morley:

Good. Let's do it. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.