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Scripture Reference: Mark 1:16-17:John 21:15-17:
Romans 5:8

One of the characters in Elizabeth Yates' beautiful Christmas novel, On That Night, is a young widow who has recently lost her husband, Jerry, in the Viet Nam War. Following a Christmas eve candelight service at the church she walked alone through the snowy night toward the house of her dead husband's parents. As she walked she was joined by a stranger, and suddenly she found herself pouring out to him what she had told no one since word had come of her husband's death. She talked about those brief moments of happiness they had shared before he went to war, and then she said: "Jerry needed someone to believe in him the way I did." To which the stranger replied: "Each one who walks the earth needs that." He's right. Each of us needs that.

We need someone to believe in us. Harry Emerson Fosdick says, "There is no motive much more stirring than the consciousness that someone believes in us, is trusting and counting on us."

It could be argued that much of what is most distinctive and memorable in the character of the disciples came from their response to Jesus' belief in them as persons. Their faith in themselves and what they could do with God's help must have been in some part a reflex of His faith in them as men. A more unlikely group you could not find: fiery tempered fishermen, a turncoat tax collector, a political revolutionary. But he chose them individually. Sometimes they were a band of brothers, but at other times they were cut-throat competitors. They vacilated between faith and a dullness that was exasperating. Yet, even after Peter betrayed that trust during Jesus' trial, he said to him later: "Feed my sheep." Not only to Peter but to all who had forsaken Him and fled in that night, Jesus promised: "You shall be my witnesses." That belief in them on the part of Jesus resulted in their becoming men who could effectively share the good news of God's acceptance. Jesus' example did not stop with them, for we find Ananias believing in the suspect former persecutor Saul of Tarsus, and we see him in turn expressing his belief in young Timothy and in the escaped slave Philemon. What a difference it made in their lives!

What a difference it still makes in our lives. How much of the best in all of us has come because we have been the object of someone's faith? When you examine your life do you find, as I do, that you owe a great deal to those who have believed in you over the years? I remember vividly a time in the seventh grade when a teacher believed in me at a very bad time in my life. That's the time of growing up when boys and girls both attract and repell each other. A group of us walked home from school every day together. Sometimes we lovingly carried the girls' books and sometimes we teased them unmercifully, calling them names that we only vaguely understood-names that would make a truck driver blush. Then one day an incident at school caused one of the girls to bring this matter to the attention of the principal. He took a list of boy's names and began to call us in, one by one. I still remember my geography teacher's shocked expression when I was called out of her class. Confronted by the principal I admitted my guilt - although I protested that the girls had called us names also. Up to that point I

had a good reputation and I recall the teachers saying, "I'm really shocked that John Paul was involved." I was even more crushed when the principal said that we would have to bring our parents to school the next day in order to be readmitted to classes. Partly out of respect for my parents and partly out of fear of them, I begged the principal not to involve them, but rather to administer the punishment himself. He agreed to give us that option. On the appointed afternoon, the three of us who had chosen to take a whipping were waiting fearfully in the outer-office. My math teacher, Mrs. Sherrill, was there and she began to talk to us about the incident. As she started to leave, she said to us, "I think what you did was wrong, but I admire you for taking responsibility for yourselves and for sparing your parents a lot of worry and shame." I don't remember the sting of the paddle half as well as I remember the good feeling that her words gave me. As a twelve-year-old boy, deeply embarrassed and ashamed, it helped to know that someone still believed in me.

We can all look back at our lives and marvel at how much growth and development have taken place because our mothers and fathers, friends and teachers, and wives and husbands have somehow said: "I believe in you." Where would any of us be today if it were not for those who across the years have had faith in us. And we still need that, no matter how old we are or how much success we have in life. We still need someone to believe in us today—a parent, a husband or a family, a teacher, an employer, a friend, a coach. "There is no motive much more stirring than the consciousness that someone believes in us, is trusting and counting on us."

Equally important is the fact that that act of human faith points beyond itself to God. Could the disciples ever have understood the love of the Father about which Jesus spoke had they not experienced the love and belief of Jesus himself? Indeed much of our own belief in the love and faith of the Father is based on the fact that before we could love or believe we were the objects of human love and faith. Even now the Father's love flows through the human experience of another believing in us.

But consider this also: Not only do we need someone to believe in us, someone needs our belief in them. This faith in persons is not meant to be hoarded up but to be passed on. There are persons right now whose lives are depending on your belief in them.

How Jesus sensed this in the lives of so many he met: the rich and the poor, the religious professionals and the common people, the tax collectors, the harlots, the weak, the sick, those that had been written off by the society in which they lived. Jesus came to fill that need, and his concern and Faith rubbed off on his followers. The classic illustration of this is Barnabas' belief in the young deserter John Mark. Paul, who believed in many other people, couldn't see anything of value in Mark. He and Barnabas went their separate ways over it. But John Mark, because of Barnabas' belief in him, became a profitable servant of Christ and was later useful, even to Paul.

Just so today someone needs your belief in them. Husbands and wives need each other's trust. Much is said today about the importance of sex in marriage, but even more important is the assurance on the part of each that their partner believes in them as persons. How many children have doubts about themselves because their parents do not evidence belief and trust in them. In parenting, there is a fine line between concern and distrust. When the parent becomes obsessed with concern, they say to the child: "I really don't believe in you. You are not a trustworthy person." As a result the child often reasons, "I must be that kind of person," and so he often plays out the mistaken role. Students need teachers who, rather than pointing out their lack of intelligence, will say, "You matter to me no matter what grades you make. You may not be an "A" student, but you have worth and potential as a person." How many employees are being choked because thir employer does not say by giving responsibility and affirmation "I believe in you as a worker?" How much of our racial and poverty problems would be solved if there were people who said and lived "I believe in you"?

I can already feel the reaction to this plea on the part of some. Some of you are saying: "That must be, but trust must be earned. A person must be proved trustworthy." Of course it is true that the other side of the coin is our obligation to live in a trustworthy way. But what I am saying today is that the kind of trust and belief that we so desperately need cannot always be earned. Our need many times cannot wait for proof! Our belief in others must be offered freely in love and in hope. We must take the risk. To believe in another person is to make ourselves vulnerable to disappointment, (Remember that even in Jesus' case there was Judas Iscariot who became a betrayor). But the need of others is so great that we must risk it. After all, our lives are the result of someone risking belief in us, often without very much proof.

During the Civil War a deserter, Roswell McIntire, was caught, court martialed and condemned to death. He stood with no defense for his act. All he could offer washis shame and the faith that if given another chance he could play the man. He appealed to President Lincoln and was pardoned on condition that he faithfully serve out his term in the cavalry to the end of the war. Today the pardon signed by Abraham Lincoln can be seen in the national archives. Across the face of it is written: "Taken from the body of R. McIntire at the Battle of Five Forks, Virginia, 1865." Five Forks was the last cavalry action of the war. Because of Lincoln's belief in him, McIntire played the man and went through to the finish. Who is it who is waiting today for your belief in them? They wait not only for your faith but also to experience through your act of love the Good News about God.

That Good News about the Father that we all need to hear and experience in the act of human trust is this: WHOEVER WE ARE GOD BE-LIEVES IN US. As important as your belief in God, is the fact that God believes in you. The belief of Jesus in the twelve was much more than the belief of a man in other men. It was the belief of God in them, and it is a sign to us that He believes in us as well. Listen to the Biblical witness: "God created man in his own image." "God so