The two of us were having lunch in a restaurant one day last week when a fifth grade teacher we have
known forever came in with her class. We were not surprised at how well they behaved because she has been
honored repeatedly over the years for the discipline she expects and the genuine affection she has for her
students. I was amused at one handsome little black boy with so much energy he obviously wanted to run and
leap, but who didn’t, and who clearly adored his no-nonsense teacher. We found out that she had written a note
to all the parents, telling them how honored she was to have their children in class and asking if they would
mind if she treated all her students to lunch. I sat there thinking how lucky those kids were.....and suddenly
realized that I wanted to talk this morning about how much influence our love and trust may have on the life of
other people.

Years ago, Dr. Robert Rosenthal, a Harvard social psychologist, demonstrated that if teachers are made
to believe certain children have exceptional promise, those children will outperform classmates of equal or even
greater talent. Experimenting in a south San Francisco elementary school and in a number of other places, he
told teachers that certain children were likely, according to fictitious pre-testing, to “spurt ahead” — and they
did, even though nothing in their real test scores had indicated that they would make sudden, noticeable
improvement in their work.
Dr. Rosenthal’s thesis was that expectation is often surprisingly effective, that if a teacher, for example, can be motivated somehow to respect a child’s potential by viewing her as especially promising, the teacher’s faith will be subtly transmitted and the child will respond. Obviously there would be limits, but he claimed that in his experiment children falsely labeled as potential “bloomers” tended to bloom with extraordinary frequency — and without special tutoring or crash programs.

Of course the reverse side of that is that most of us perform less well in any situation where we are not trusted, where someone makes it clear that nothing much is expected of us. If you were listening a few minutes ago when ________________ read from Mark’s gospel, you heard something quite unexpected. Mark (6:5) says bluntly that when Jesus came back to his home town after being a success in other places “he could do no mighty works there” because his neighbors did not believe in him. Listen carefully now and I can give you an example of how the gospels were written.

Some years after Mark wrote his gospel, Matthew sat down to write his — with a copy of Mark in front of him. When he gets to the verse that says Jesus “could” not do certain things because his audience was sceptical, Matthew apparently feels that this diminishes Jesus so he changes the story slightly. Instead of saying with Mark that Jesus “could not” do great works without an trusting audience, Matthew says he “did not” do them — which avoids the clear statement that Jesus failed and suggests, instead, that he simply chose to limit his performance. Mark’s gospel is the earliest one we have, and since Jesus was elevated more and more as as
the years passed, I think we have to believe that it was Mark who told the blunt truth: that even Jesus himself could not do his best work in the absence of trust and expectation.

Neither can we. When we are children, like the ones in the restaurant I mentioned earlier, we tend to perform as we are expected to perform — which means that both parents and teachers need to learn how to make children believe they are believed in, that whatever their past performances may have been, the future is hopeful. And to the degree that the child changes in response to this trust, parents and teachers have been involved, as God was, in creation: bringing something into being that did not exist before. As Owen Wister put it once in that famous old novel, *The Virginian*: “It was neither preaching nor praying that made a better man of me, but one or two people who believed in me better than I deserved, and I hated to disappoint them.”

I wish to be personal for a moment. I can’t imagine a more crippling handicap than having to admit that no one trusts me. Even a moment in an atmosphere of suspicion makes me awkward and miserable; to live constantly among people who have no high expectations of me would make life a poor and paltry business, because other people’s trust is my greatest motivator. I have never forgotten a man who came into my church office many years ago in another city and stood before my desk unable to speak at first, his face contorted in anguish, his eyes filled with tears. I didn’t know the man, and it was awkward, and I couldn’t come up with anything better than, “I would like to help, if I could.” I was running through all sorts of scenarios: he had just lost his job, a friend had died, a child was critically ill, his wife had left him — but what he said when he finally
got control of himself was none of those things. With the passion of a man who could not go on living without it, he said: “I’ve got to have somebody who believes in me!”

It took an hour to learn what had happened. He had betrayed his friends and his family, and he had learned too late how important their trust had been. He was so desperate that he begged me, a total stranger, to tell him that I believed in him. It was no time to quibble over how I could believe in him when I didn’t even know him, so I stretched the truth a little in the name of love and said, “I believe in you.” He calmed down and asked if I would be willing for us to shake hands. I was, and we did, and the last I heard of him a few months later was that he had managed to get his life in order.

I found this paragraph somewhere, years ago, and put it in my files. I believe absolutely in what it says:

“The greatest force for making people bigger and better than they are now is the belief in your heart and mind that they have infinite potential for growth. Even when they fail us, we are to continue to carry and express the mental image of what they may become. To have someone believe in you, even when you fail, is the most blessed and creative force in the universe.”

Once, in another context, I recalled a line from Emerson about the amazing power of great expectations:

“Trust men,” he said, “and they will be true to you; trust them greatly, and they will show themselves great.”

Emerson was no fool, and did not mean there would be no exceptions or failures; men who speak great and
challenging truths do not stop to warn of exceptions. But he was sure that most of us never fully realize the
creative power of trust and expectation.

I remember something from the memoirs of a man named Arthur John Gossip of the University of
Glasgow, in Scotland. He was remembering recalled a certain young officer in his battalion in World War I
who through weakness and illness failed in the face of the enemy, was courtmartialed and punished. The
colonel in command said “We must show him we still trust him, or the lad will go to pieces.” So not once did
the Colonel allude to the unhappy incident, but treated his subordinate with the old confidence in him, and a few
weeks later in a particular tight corner put him in command again. In the following few days of terrible frontline
combat the reprieved young lieutenant won honor after honor, and promotion for gallantry in the field. Mr.
Gossip recalls that when he congratulated his friend, the young officer said: “What else could I do? I failed
him, and he trusted me.” The Colonel had played God and created a new man by the power of expectation.

In another age, before it came to be considered cruel and unusual punishment to require the reading of
700-page novels, I used to include Charles Dickens’ *Great Expectations* in my English novel course, and the
name of that book struck me as an obvious choice for the title of this sermon. But there is something more.
Dickens has an awkward boy in the story whose name is Pip, and in all those hundreds of pages one brief
scene has stuck fast in my memory. When unpolished Pip encounters a sophisticated young woman who
makes fun of his clumsy feet and his coarse hands, he reacts like this: “I had never thought of being ashamed of
my hands before; but I began to consider them a very indifferent pair. Her contempt for me was so strong that it became infectious, and I caught it.”

Most of us, at some time in our lives, have caught the infection of someone’s ridicule. Over the years I have counseled with grown men and women who still bear the scars of a father’s contempt, a mother’s indifference — victims of the incredible power parents have to cripple their children’s confidence or, by believing in them, to create strong, healthy lives. People respond to great expectations. I can remember no more painful times as a boy than when my father said of some foolishness of mine, “I expected something better from you.” I would have gotten over a good spanking much sooner! I was thinking of the power of expectation a couple of weeks ago when I heard of a book about the creative power of trust, a book so obscure I finally had to get it from another city through interlibrary loan.

I had thought it was a novel but it turned out to be a play by an English author, a play surely meant to be seen on stage rather than read at home, and I would not recommend plowing through it unless you are hopelessly obsessed with this notion of how much influence we can have on other people’s lives, because that’s what it’s all about. The setting is a tawdry rooming house in London and you get an idea of what its renters are like when you read the cast of characters, listed not by names but by their personality traits: A satyr, a coward, a bully, a hussy, a shrew, a cad, a snob, a slut, a rogue and a cheat. They are a miserably selfish lot who can’t stand each other and who put one another down constantly. A young maid named Stasia, depressed by her
work among them, has already turned into a cynic. “It’s a rummy world,” she says, “when you come to think of it.” And the manager, Mrs. Sharpe, so mistrusts all her scruffy, back-biting roomers that she says it’s like “living in a den of lions.”

One room is vacant up on the third floor, and although she hates the thought of adding one more twisted life to her menagerie, Mrs. Sharpe has put an ad in the newspaper. And by and by, after we have watched all these misbegotten souls in action for a while on the stage, a knock comes at the door and a man appears who is identified only as The Stranger. His age is hard to guess, although his old-fashioned dress and staff somehow suggest the days when people made religious pilgrimages. Unlike the roomers, he has no sense of self-importance and if anything is remarkable about him it lies in his simplicity and gentleness. His first bow to the landlady is described as “the simplest of courtesies, yet one fails to see how it could express more were she the daughter of [royalty]......And Mrs. Sharpe (we are told), returning the bow with flustered surprise, becomes — for the moment — a lady.”

The Stranger treats each renter the same way, as if all of them were splendid men and women of great worth and potential. Believing in them, to their utter astonishment, he touches a lost idealism in each one and day-by-day slowly transforms the whole place. The once dowdy, surly little maid, Stasia, is the last one who speaks with him before he leaves. Her face, as the curtain is about to fall, glows with happiness — a stage direction calls it “the face of one to whom Love itself has spoken.” Smiling through tears she says, “It was so
kind of you....to come.” And paying through her a compliment to all of them — that he had simply read the hidden yearnings of their crippled hearts — he replies, “I came because you wanted me.”

The last thing we see, as he leaves and the maid walks away from the door, is a shaft of sunlight falling on the worn carpet. With the stage empty, the curtain hesitates a moment while we reflect on the symbolism: the soiled carpet standing for all the defiled lives we have met in that tawdry place, and the shaft of sunlight for the Stranger’s transforming faith in their long-lost better selves. Despite the hints that a Christlike figure has come among these people, lifting them by the power of great expectations, he is never identified.....and I think I know why.

He stands for each one of us when we work, among our family and our friends, the magic power of trust.

Lead us from this house of worship, Eternal God, filled with faith and loving grace, into a world where there is much to do.

Amen.

among wait to discover more abundant life the kingdom of light, eager to bring out in others, by our faith in them, the lives of create by our faith in others the