

**You Asked for It: What if I Don't Believe?**  
**A Sermon by Louise F. Westfall**  
**Fairmount Presbyterian Church**  
**Cleveland Heights, Ohio**  
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**Text: Acts 17:16-34**

LOUISE: Strictly speaking, today's You Asked for It topic was not requested by anyone. Instead it runs like an unraveling thread being pulled through conversations with people like you and me. It's hardly ever asked hostilely or with an "I dare you to judge me" attitude. Mostly it's voiced in an almost apologetic tone.

*\* I keep my fingers crossed when we say the Apostles' Creed. Virgin Birth? Resurrection of the Body? Come on!*

*\* I just have a problem with religion when it makes its own beliefs normative for everyone.*

*\*The scientific world view challenges the miraculous claims of scripture. How can you expect thinking people to buy it?*

*\*I refuse to believe in a God who permitted the Holocaust, or lets children get cancer.*

DAVIS: Many young people would echo those questions. I'm Davis Phillipell, and was a member of last year's confirmation class. I'm a sophomore at Hawken School, and along with my parents Mark and Buffy, have attended Fairmount for years. I have a hard time affirming some of Christianity's beliefs. In my statement of faith, for example, I wrote: *[I believe that God is a creation of the human mind, invented to give our lives meaning. Jesus Christ was a man who showed people a good way to live, but he was not the Son of God. He was a teacher who loved people and helped them love others. ]*

LOUISE: I invited Davis to participate with me this morning because I think he has shown the courage to express the questions and doubts about faith many of us share. And I also believe, contrary to some conventional wisdom, that Church is exactly the place where those questions and doubts need airing. The second Scripture reading today is a narrative from Christianity's earliest days. With missionary zeal born of conviction that the risen Christ had sent them to proclaim good news, the apostles have traveled throughout the Mediterranean world. In this reading, Paul arrives in Athens, center of philosophical study and cosmopolitan sophistication. We're not surprised that he feels compelled to counter their worldly view with an other-worldly one, but note *how* he does it. Not with threats of hellfire and brimstone, not judgmentally, but with an invitation to come closer, to know more. Today we might call it appreciative inquiry.

Bring your own questions to the reading from the Acts of the Apostles, in the seventeenth chapter at the sixteenth verse, found on page 137 of the chapel/pew Bibles' New Testament section. [Acts 17:16-34]

When my son began high school, he declared that he was an atheist. I'm sure you could find psychological reasons to explain why this son of two ministers who had attended church and Sunday school practically every week of his life and been confirmed, would reject God, but he focused on only one: belief in a supernatural being just didn't make sense to him. Atheist or not, he still had to go to church and Sunday school every week. So I was overjoyed when one week he came home from youth fellowship with the startling news, "Mom, I'm NOT an atheist anymore!" Before I could ask how this change of heart came to be, he went on, "I'm an AGNOSTIC." O, the blessings of a good youth program!

Well. Wondering about God is not the worst thing. In fact, at Fairmount we encourage this, particularly during the confirmation process.

DAVIS: The confirmation classes are designed with opportunity for lots of discussion. It's not a time when Christian beliefs get crammed down your throat. All along the way, we were encouraged to express our doubts, ask the hard questions. No one assumed we were going to believe it all. And no one assumed we were automatically going to join the church either!

LOUISE: Sometimes we think of confirmation as "graduation" from Sunday school, as if it's the last time an individual will have to learn about faith and consider what he or she truly believes, as if it's supposed to be all settled from then on. I think the whole church could benefit from the confirmation approach and consider one's faith as always "under construction." A song by one of my favorite artists, Leonard Cohen, suggests that a certain agnosticism may actually provide insight: *Forget your perfect offering, he sings, there is a crack in everything; that's how the light gets in.* Those who think they know may actually miss some light because they have built strong, impenetrable walls with "the answers." To understand that one does *not* know may become a portal into which truth may shine.

That clearly was Paul's attitude with the Athenians. He met them where they were, praising their doubts and questions, their hunger for divine connection. He quoted sources with whom they were familiar, their poets and philosophers to urge them into further inquiry. He took the church to them, and in so doing, offered the contemporary church an insight we sometimes forget. A church is not to be a conclave for the committed, but a sanctuary for the seeker.

The mainline church has many faults, but we can be distinguished from fundamentalist Christian bodies because we welcome inquiry. You will not be force-fed faith within these walls. You will not be required to accept one expression of Christian doctrine wholesale, or commanded to believe and act in conformance with one interpretation of Scripture. Instead, you will be invited to join the conversation, to speak and listen and act on what you do believe.

Taking a second—or six hundredth-- look at what you *thought* Christian faith affirmed might surprise you too. Many of us were raised with a traditional view of Christianity that features an all-knowing, all-seeing grey-bearded old man, far off in the heavens, who keeps score of human goodness and sin, so that when you die, He'll know whether to admit you to Heaven or consign you to Hell. But this cosmic bean counter deity neither scares or inspires many people any more. Or take the much-touted faith of our fathers, the founders of our nation. Their deist perspective attributed creation to God, who set the original universal watch and let it go, observing from a very great distance and never inserting himself into human affairs. This God is achingly inadequate for contemporary people, hungry for a lived experience of the transcendent, an encounter with God in the middle of human life in all its glorious complexity. My point is not to criticize any particular expressions of Christian faith or tradition, but simply to suggest that faith is not static. If your faith hasn't changed much from Sunday school days or your own confirmation, then maybe what you're rejecting is an incomplete, partial, or even distorted picture of the real deal.

DAVIS: Yeah, I know what you mean. Long ago, when men cursed and beat the ground with sticks, it was called witchcraft. Today it's called "golf."

LOUISE: Right. Some golfers in the congregation might disagree, but the point is well taken. We assign meaning to particular acts and rituals, and even to words themselves. The creeds and confessions of our church reflect what the Church has declared about God in various historical and cultural contexts. These affirmations change over time and circumstance and reflect the growth in knowledge and understanding of the world and of human beings themselves. One of the most important affirmations Presbyterians make is expressed in a Latin phrase translated "The Church, reformed, and always being reformed."

DAVIS: Well, then, why did we have to learn all that stuff in confirmation class? It sounds as if you think we're kind of on our own to pick and choose what we want to believe—or what we reject. Is it important, then, to study the historical dimensions of Christian faith?

Why do we learn and recite the Apostles' Creed, for example, if we don't really have to believe it?

LOUISE: Good question! But maybe it's not so much the specific ideas of the Creed that we're affirming, as it is our place in this long and rich tradition. The Church in succeeding generations doesn't have to reinvent Christianity—we can see it, study it, argue with it, reform and refine it to make it our own in this time. But we have an "it" to work with—the whole story of God and God's activity with humanity since the dawn of time, culminating in the life of Jesus, his example and teachings, his death and his follower's experience of his living presence. Davis, your confirmation statement says some things about what you find difficult to believe. And yet you stated pretty clearly that you DID want to join the church. What's up with that?

DAVIS: I want to join this church, even if I don't believe everything you're supposed to, because of the people. When we gather to worship or get involved in a mission project, we are learning more about how to love one another, which is what Jesus taught. Mrs. Chokel was my confirmation mentor, and she definitely helped me see the benefits of belonging to this congregation, because there are many people who care about you.

LOUISE: And there you have it, one of the best antidotes I know for unbelief, disbelief, or kinda-sorta belief. Stick with the faith community, and avail yourself of what it has to offer. Perfect, spiritual people who always do the right thing???? No, imperfect people who know we need God. Seekers who have found a home where we are accepted just as we are. Men and women, youth and children, who are discovering what is always and absolutely true—that God loves us unconditionally and eternally—and are learning to live in that relationship. People wanting to live with purpose and passion. The Christian life is less about coming to believe certain things as it is learning to discern God's presence more and more, and being transformed by that relationship into a person of compassion, justice, and hope.

Most of us are so busy making a living that we may neglect the spiritual task of making a life. With others, we are reminded and encouraged, and recruited to do so! In a community of faith, we are supported through worship, expressions of caring and friendship, and actions that take us out of ourselves and our little worlds and connect us to something greater, a larger purpose than we can imagine on our own. I want to suggest three ways to nurture faith in community:

Make worship a priority. We have four weekly worship services: two on Sunday morning using traditional music and liturgy, one on Sunday evening with contemporary music, drama, and multi-media presentations, and one on Wednesday evening focused primarily on scripture, silent meditation in candlelight, and the simple, haunting melodies of the Taize community in France. Make a choice to gather every week, the way you make a commitment to your physical health by working out, or to your emotional well-being by spending time with your family.

Go deeper into faith. Foremost historian of religion Huston Smith uses a metaphor of digging a well: if what you're looking for is water, better to dig one well sixty feet deep than to dig six wells ten feet deep [cited in Marcus Borg, *The Heart of Christianity*, p. 223]. Here at Fairmount we have a smorgasbord of small groups specifically designed to assist you in digging where you're most likely to find life-giving, thirst-quenching water. A new opportunity this Fall will be a course called "Living the Questions" which will help seekers and veterans alike in discovering the relevance of Christianity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and what a meaningful faith can look like in today's world.

Do something for others. Serve. Give your time, talent, and treasure on behalf of those in need, those who suffer, those who are lonely or forgotten.

What if you don't believe? Welcome home.

DAVIS: What if you don't believe? Welcome home.

LOUISE: Our affirmation of faith today acknowledges that we are at different places in our faith journey. Rather than saying what we believe in unison, I invite us each one into a time of silence. Take the insert from your bulletin and open it to find the most recent of Presbyterian statements of faith. Consider the phrases of that statement and circle ones you affirm, put a question mark by ones you doubt or question, and put a check mark by phrases that seem particularly helpful in guiding your daily life. In the silence, pray the prayer of a biblical father who came to Jesus seeking healing and life: *I believe Lord; help my unbelief.* Amen.

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