

# Sermons at First Church

**A Ministry of the Word**  
**May 21, 2017**

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**Clarksburg, WV**

**Acts 17:22-31**

*“Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way.”* (Acts 17:22 N.R.S.V.)

## The Choice

In its day, Athens Greece was the culture capital of the world. The city was very sophisticated. Which is to say they took great pride in their broad education and reasoning skills. The elite of the city loved to gather at the Areopagus to hear new speakers and new ideas, then to debate and pontificate about the same. In our lesson from Acts, the Apostle Paul speaks to a crowd hanging out at the Areopagus in the great city of Athens.

He says to them, “I see how extremely religious you are in every way.” Paul had noticed that everywhere he went there were temples, idols, and altars of all the different gods and goddesses. Paul even stumbled upon an altar with the inscription, “To an unknown god.”

So he proceeded to tell them about the one true God, the one that they felt drawn to, but did not know. He told them about God’s love for them and about the salvation through Christ and wonders of the kingdom of God. When he got done, some scoffed, but some of them said, “We will hear you again about this.”

So much has changed in the world since that day so long ago. Yet, human nature remains much the same. I suspect that if the Apostle Paul were to speak to a group of social elites in a Starbucks in New York City, he might get the same sort of response.

He might use somewhat different words. He might open with “I see that you all are very spiritual.” He probably wouldn’t say “religious,” because that term means something different today. At one time, being religious and being spiritual were seen as the same thing.

Today people see “religious” as referring to the church and the body of believers. And for many, the term “religion” refers to empty and meaningless rites and rituals. “Spiritual,” on the other hand, is about the recognition that there is more to the world than we can experience with the five senses. “Spiritual” expresses the longing to be connected to something greater than ourselves. And somehow spiritual sounds purer in modern use than religious.

It is not usual to hear someone today proudly say, “I am spiritual but not religious.”

I am not sure there is as much difference in the actual terms as people think. To be spiritual is to feel a yearning for God. As is commonly said, there is a god-shaped hole in each of us that nothing else will fit or fill, but God. To be spiritual is to long to belong, to long to be connected to something greater than ourselves. To be spiritual is to be rightly related to the world and everything in it.

Religion, especially as it relates to Christianity has the same purpose. However, Christianity requires us to make a choice, a leap of faith, a commitment to Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior and to God Almighty as creator, redeemer, and sustainer.

One can be spiritual in a general kind of free floating way that doesn't really require anything much of us. To be Christian is commit to God and to practicing our spirituality in a certain defined way.

To be sure, many of the people who say they are spiritual but not religious, are agnostic. They feel the pull of the divine, but they are still gathering evidence. They don't think they have enough evidence to make a decision.

So here are some things to consider. First, there is no proof in the absolute sense that God exists. That is why we call it faith. If we could prove the existence and love of God, it wouldn't be called faith. Once we believe we see all kinds of evidence for the existence and goodness of God. But that is because we already believe.

Second, we do not let lack of evidence stop us from other big decisions in life. What we know, we know by faith. How do you know that the special someone in your life is the one you are to marry? At some point, far before all the evidence is in, you have to make a leap of faith.

There was a scene in a movie I watched where the bride is having the jitters. She says to her maid of honor. "If this marriage lasts, I will look back on this and laugh, because it was nothing. But if it all falls apart, I am going to be saying, I knew something was wrong before I walked down the aisle."

What we know, we know by faith. What we should believe. Who we should marry. What we want to choose as our career. All of those require a leap of faith.

It is only the small stuff in which we are able to make a decision based on complete information. After one ride in an airplane, I knew that I always wanted a window seat. So now I can make that decision with confidence and good information. But the big life decisions, not so much.

Third, trusting God is a choice. That is what it comes down to really. We have some evidence. We have scripture. The witness of other Christians. And we have the movement of the Holy Spirit. Yet in the end, trusting God is a choice.

We will always have enough evidence to trust God, just as we will always have enough evidence not to trust God. So we can't simply decide on the basis of the evidence. If we wait til we know enough, we will never make a choice. And the decision not to make a choice is in itself, a choice. Trusting God is a choice. Make a choice.

The fourth thing to consider is that we do not have to have all of our doubts addressed, and all of our questions answered. It is enough to have the conviction that the ultimate answers to life's question are known to God. It is enough to know that God knows.

In the Air Force, they used to talk about "the need to know." In war time, it is important that the enemy not know your plans. It is also a given that the more people who know the details of a plan, the harder it is to keep it a secret. Therefore the details of plans are restricted to those who have a need to know. For example, the pilot of the plane carrying paratroopers needs to know where the drop zone is. But the pilot does not need to know what the paratroopers are going to be doing once they are on the ground.

As Christians we need to get comfortable on living on a "need to know" basis. Some things are for God and God alone to know. We don't have to know all the whys. We just have to trust that God knows and has loving reasons.

Today we will be celebrating the baptism of little Kelsea Atkinson. There is something beautiful about infant baptism. Even before we can possibly know enough to say "yes" to God. God says "yes" to us and we, the congregation, on God's behalf, say "welcome to the family."

This does not take away Kelsea's need to say "yes" to God when she gets older. But it sets the stage. It will be so much easier for her to say, "Yes, I want to be part of your family God," when she is already seated at his table.

Amen.