

“How Can I Believe in a God I Can’t Prove?”

Date: October 21, 2018

Place: Lakewood UMC

Texts: Psalm 14:1a; Hebrews 11:1-3

Occasion: Ask series

Themes: Faith, doubt, proof, God

If you subscribe to or read *the Erie-Times News*, over the past year there have been a number of letters to the editor from various readers debating the existence of God. There were some confirmed atheists writing to the editor making the claim that believing in God was like believing in a child hood fantasy figure. It made people feel good but there was no way to prove such a God actually existed.

And then, several people of faith wrote to the editor, coming to the defense of God and making their claim that there is indeed proof for the existence of God. They talked about their personal experiences of knowing God; they argued from the authority of Scripture; and some used philosophical arguments of logic.

The debate rages on; the letters to the editor continue; and I don't think either side has convinced the other. Such conversations are rarely effective, because neither side has real data to back up its position. This is true even for the most brilliant of atheists and theologians. Neither Stephen Hawking nor the pope can definitively prove or disprove God by using data.

The idea of God is easier to explain than a proof of God. As we grow up asking questions about God, we hope for scientific proof, thinking that somehow if God exists there must be a way to demonstrate it. But is such a proof possible? Not if God is truly God.

So what is the point of trying to prove God? I believe that in the day and time in which we live, it is not only important but necessary to be able to make a defense for why we believe in what we believe. Precisely because there are persons writing public letters in our newspapers

discrediting our faith, we need to be able to offer explanations as to why we hold these beliefs. Perhaps we will not win any arguments, but we ought to at least have an explanation for why we believe. So, let's try.

Let's consider briefly several arguments made in the 13th century by Thomas Aquinas, one of the church's greatest theologians. His five proofs have been influential and important in this conversation. The five proofs are not separate and independent but rather building blocks for a complete argument for God. The first three are essentially the same but written in three different ways.

First, Aquinas offers the argument of the Unmoved Mover. Something that moves had to be set in motion. If you see a car moving down the road, you know that something happened to make that car move. The same argument can be made for creation itself. Our world exists and is moving; something must have caused that movement. Something had to start the world in motion. It didn't start by itself.

The second is called the argument of the First Cause. Similar to the unmoved mover, the first cause proof relies on the ultimate regression argument – something caused this to happen, but something else had to cause that to happen first, going back, back, back. In other words, something that exists cannot cause itself. The first cause of all that exists we call God.

The third argument is called Contingency. It says, everything in nature either exists or it doesn't. There was a time when you didn't exist, and now you do. This is true for everything in the universe: there was a time before it existed, going back until there was a time when nothing existed. Therefore, if at one time nothing was in existence, it would have been impossible for anything to have begun to exist, and thus even now

nothing would be in existence; which is absurd. Because we exist now, we know there was a time when nothing existed; therefore, God's existence is necessary. Our existence is contingent upon God.

Are your heads spinning? They should be; this is deep thinking. In his fourth argument Aquinas focuses on differences in degree that are found in the world. Things can be hot or cold, good or bad. He says that in order for there to be a comparison of good and bad, then there must be something against which we are comparing them. Hence, there must be ultimate goodness or justice. That pinnacle of all things we call God.

The fifth argument is often called the watchmaker analogy, because by looking at a watch you understand someone designed the watch. Since there is a purpose to the object, there must be an intelligent designer who created the watch. If an object has a design, then there is a designer.

This argument is quite popular among Christians and I have often used it myself. However, it is one of the weakest arguments. Why? Because scientists have come to understand how complexity that appears designed can be the result of millions of years of evolution.

Which is why we use all of the arguments together and not simply one of them alone: together they demonstrate that belief in God is rational and logically consistent. We cannot provide the kind of physical evidence that science may demand, but neither can the atheist provide physical evidence that God does not exist.

However, as the author of Hebrews points out, faith for the believers is often its own proof: Remember this verse: "Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see." (Hebrews 11:1, NIV)

The proofs we have are enough to demonstrate that faith in God can be rational. But faith is about more than proof. It is living as if there is a

God even if you do not yet completely believe. We might not be able to prove God in the same way we can prove an algebraic equation, but there is certainly enough evidence to demonstrate the likelihood that God does indeed exist.

So, even if you have doubts, and doubts often lead to greater faith, act each day as if there is a God. Put yourself in a position where you can live with hope. Pray to God, trust in God, hope in God, even if you're not entirely sure that God does exist.

Some would call it fake-it-till-you-make-it theology. Some would say we're simply hedging our bets. But it's more than that. It's stepping out in faith even when the proof you might have wanted isn't there. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, once experienced despair.

He had been to seminary, knew the Scriptures and the arguments for God, and yet he had lost hope and faith. He was then given this advice: "Preach faith until you have faith." He tried it, and after a time he heard the message of faith again, had a changed heart, and once again was able to live a life of faith and hope. Rather than give in to despair, he acted as if he had faith until he did indeed have faith.

People often ask me how to convince their children or their parents or their friend to believe in God. It isn't by sitting them down and walking them through the various proofs we talked about this morning. It is by living a compelling life of hope and faith.

At some point in everyone's life, atheism and agnosticism are going to prove insufficient. The question will change from "How can I believe in a God I can't prove?" to "How can I afford not to believe in God when faith, life and hope are offered?"

This is what Jesus embodied when he was on earth. He didn't present logical proofs to his disciples, but rather he ate with tax collectors, healed lepers, and created a community of love and hope that was built on Christ himself. This is who we call God.

So, your non-Christian friend says to you, "Okay, I don't want a long sermon, but tell me this, "How can you trust God when you can't prove that God exists? You can't see God or touch God, so how can you believe in God?"

You might say, "Proof about God goes both ways. We can't prove that God doesn't exist, just as we can't prove that God does exist. In fact, the only proof we have is that we exist and that we have life and hope. I'm not interested in proving God. I want to live the life that a great and perfect God made possible."

Amen? Amen. Let us stand and sing our song of response: "Great is the Lord."

This sermon borrows heavily from the book *Ask: Faith Questions in a Skeptical Age*, by Scott J. Jones and Arthur D. Jones, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2015; pp. 57-69.