

The way, the truth, and the life

Colleagues,

As a teenager, I grew deeply troubled by a theological question which has surely been troubling to many pensive Christians, young and old, across time and space: namely, if belief in Jesus is the only path to salvation, then what is to become of my friends and loved ones who die without believing the gospel? Today we offer response to that question, in the form of a sermon by the Rev. Dr. Steven E. Albertin, a fellow member of the editorial team. (You may recall some of Steve's earlier work in this space—including, most recently, the homily of [ThTheol #722](#).) In this case, he's preaching on John 14:1-13, and his powerful and straightforward preaching voice rings out clearly, even in print. Would his response feel sufficient to someone deeply troubled by the "What about my friends" question? I'll leave that for you to decide as you read, and I pray that you'll find his words a clarifying aid to your own thinking and preaching.

Peace and Joy,

Carol Braun, for the editorial team

"WHAT ABOUT UNCLE CHARLIE?"

John 14:1-14

Easter 5A

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Christ Church

The Lutheran Church of Zionsville

Rev. Dr. Steven E. Albertin

Helen had to see me right away. She came and sat in my office sobbing and grieving. Her beloved Uncle Charlie had just died. She would be leaving the next day for the funeral. Her Uncle Charlie and his late wife, Agness, had virtually raised her. Now, with the death of Uncle Charlie, questions plagued her. Doubt haunted her.

Helen had dearly loved Uncle Charlie, but Uncle Charlie never went to church. He didn't believe in Jesus and at times wasn't sure if there even was a god. But Uncle Charlie was a good man. He had always treated her with kindness. She recited numerous examples of his gentleness and compassion. However, now she wondered about his fate. Would Uncle Charlie go to heaven or would he be condemned to spend eternity in hell because he never believed in Jesus? Surely, his goodness must count for something. Surely, God would not be so unfair and consign such a good person to eternal damnation. She wanted words of assurance from her pastor.

Helen quoted words from today's Gospel. "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (v. 6). She found them troubling and scary when she thought about the fate of her beloved Uncle Charlie. Uncle Charlie did not believe in Jesus.

It is clear. Jesus is the only way to God, life, and salvation. The claim is exclusive and absolute. However, at the same time, we have seen the claim that Jesus is "the only way" used by some to judge, threaten and demand that others "accept Jesus as their personal Lord and Savior" or else. This kind of arrogant Christianity rubs us the wrong way. Jesus' claim to be the only way to the Father ought not to be the equivalent of beating someone over the head until they give up and give in. We know that Jesus' invitation to faith is much more about love than

threat.

Nevertheless, we cannot sweep Helen's question under the table. What about Uncle Charlie, and all the other Uncle Charlies of the world? What about those who never had a chance to hear about Jesus? What about good people like Mahatma Gandhi or Buddha or the aborigine from the outback of Australia or those whose place of birth, cultural background, or time in history never gave them the opportunity to hear about Jesus and the God whom he calls "Father"? Or what about the child who died in the neonatal intensive care unit of Riley Hospital after only twenty hours of life and never had the chance to hear about Jesus? Have his parents been derelict because they did not get their child baptized in time?

Is God going to just write off all these Uncle Charlies and send them packing when they show up at the pearly gates because they did not believe in Jesus? This kind of God seems horribly unfair, more like a monster than a beloved Father.

If we are honest with ourselves, we must admit that we sympathize with Helen's concern for Uncle Charlie. All of us deep down harbor the hope that God will be fair. Of course, God's idea of fairness must agree with our idea of fairness. We often complain that if God and life were only fair, then all would be well. Of course, it is only fair that God count all the good things we do. If they count for us, they surely must count for the Uncle Charlies of this world, so that finally, in the end, at the last day, in eternity, they too will be saved.

However, is that the good news that we think it is? Do we in the end want God to be utterly fair with us? The problem is that if God were to be utterly fair with us, we would be in big trouble. We cut corners. We rationalize. We conveniently ignore all those times we have dropped the ball. We pretend to be better than we

are. We desperately try to keep prying eyes away from the secrets hidden our closets. We, like all the Uncle Charlies of this world, cling to our goodness and get nervous when someone starts poking around in our garbage. In short, we want to be in charge, call the shots, decide what is fair and what is not—and play God.

The problem is that sooner or later reality sets in. We get exposed. We are not God. We are not in charge. We don't get to call the shots. We don't get to decide what is fair and what is not. Remember, that is exactly what the serpent promised Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve could be in charge, call the shots, and decide what is fair, good and evil, right and wrong, and ultimately be God, if they would only eat of the forbidden fruit. They believed the serpent, tried to play God, and suffered the consequences.

That was Helen's problem. She thought she knew what God ought to do. She came to her pastor so that I would assure her that her understanding of God was right. She disagreed with Jesus when he said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." He was too narrow, too intolerant, and too restrictive. Was not Uncle Charlie good enough? Did he, did she, do we really need Jesus that much?

Before we even know it, look what we have done. We have put ourselves on the throne and told Jesus to move over. Jesus may have said "I am the way, the truth, and the life," but we know better. We will try our hand at being God. We will decide what is fair.

Talk about playing with fire and inviting disaster. Talk about waiting to be knocked off our pedestal and reminded who is in charge. God will not be mocked. God is in charge. God does not ask for our opinion. God sends stuff that does not fit our

template. We are not in charge.

In today's Gospel, Thomas, Philip, and the disciples were deeply troubled, anxious, worried. They thought they had things figured out. They thought that their investment in Jesus was finally going to pay off. They thought their sense of fairness was about to be vindicated as Jesus would soon begin his kingdom in all of its glory. They would have their places of privilege. Then, Jesus throws them a curve. He says that he is about to leave them—and die. This did not fit their template. This did not compute.

They, like we, arrogantly presume to be able to write a job description for God and define what it takes for God to be worthy of being God. They, like we, complain about God's definition of fairness. They, like we, deserve to be expelled like Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden forever. That is what we deserve. But instead, Jesus continues to love us relentlessly all the way to the cross and beyond. God will not give up on us. God sends Jesus to bear our arrogance and stupidity all the way to the cross. In exchange for sufferings that are unexplained, hurts that are undeserved, and questions that are unanswered, God gives us the peace that the world will never understand. God will not let us go. God loves us no matter what. Even death on a cross and a rock-sealed tomb cannot stop the love of God.

That changes everything—for Helen, for us, and for all who foolishly think they can play God. We at last can LET GO, and LET GOD. We can trust God and live with the unsolved mysteries, unexplained sufferings, and unanswered questions.

What about the Uncle Charlies of this world? What about all of those who never had the chance to learn of God's gracious love in Jesus or, when they did, still found it too fantastic to believe? Instead of thinking that we can be God better than God

can be God and that we can explain it all, we can let God be God. What to do with the Uncle Charlies of this world is God's problem, not ours. We turn their fate over to God, and fervently pray in the name of Jesus that God have mercy on them. When we start to play God and think that we need to decide who gets in and who does not, we go down a road that will only further trouble our hearts and trouble the world.

God's love for the world is absolutely clear and certain. It is only by telling the story of Jesus that we can be sure that God is our father and we are his children. Therefore, Jesus is "the way, the truth, and the life." When Jesus says, "no one comes to the Father except through me," he is reminding us that there is no other place in the world, no other god, no other philosophy or self-help system, no other way of life that can offer us a gift like this.

There is much in life that remains messy, confusing, and chaotic. What about Uncle Charlie? We don't know what God ultimately will do with the Uncle Charlies of this world. That is God's problem, not ours. That is the difference between being God and not being God. Since we are not God, there will always be questions unanswered and mysteries unsolved. However, we do know this. It is clear and certain: Because of Jesus Christ, God loves us no matter what. Because of Christ, we do have a God we can trust and a future we can embrace. We can assure the world unequivocally and unambiguously: God IN CHRIST loves all—even the Uncle Charlies who never got it but who we hope in eternity will.

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