

## IF SIDE EFFECTS PERSIST

05.03.26 John 14:1–14

Dean Feldmeyer

Probably no other biblical scholar has been as deeply committed to the words of the fourth gospel as Jesuit priest Father Raymond Brown. His magnum opus—a two-volume commentary on the gospel—is both exhaustive and, frankly, exhausting: bought by thousands and read by dozens. That is probably why he distilled the essence of those two volumes into a very readable little paperback entitled “The Community of the Beloved Disciple.”

I commend it to you as essential reading if you want to walk away from the Gospel of John with anything resembling understanding. The fourth gospel is a difficult book, and Ray Brown makes it manageable for laypeople and clergy alike.

In that book, he makes some very solid arguments about how we should approach the gospel and how we can gather for ourselves the wisdom it offers.

It is of primary importance, he says, to remember that this gospel was written for a specific audience—probably the Christian community in Ephesus, Asia Minor, sometime in the late first or early second century. Ephesus was a large, metropolitan city known for its rich ethnic diversity and robust trade.

The Christian community there likely mirrored the city in which it was located. From all evidence, it too was big, noisy, robust, and diverse—no less prone to controversy and conflict than churches today.

Brown reminds us that it is very likely the writer of the fourth gospel was addressing some of those controversies and conflicts in the book that bears his name.

## TO THE FATHER THROUGH ME

If we dig a little beneath the surface of today’s gospel lesson, we discover two distinct issues that likely plagued the Ephesian church—each of which is worthy of a sermon in its own right.

The first issue emerges in verse 6. Jesus says, “No one comes to the Father except through me.” Clearly, there was an issue of authority being hotly debated in Ephesus.

In the verses prior (vv. 1–5), Jesus seems to be defending diversity within the Christian community: “In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places.” The word \*house\* can mean a literal building or it can mean a family or tribe. Either way, the metaphor works. Early Christians often worshipped in the homes of members, and they often thought of themselves—and spoke of themselves—as a family.

So, it is possible, according to Jesus, to be a Christian and still identify with your own ethnic heritage. There are many tribes of different nationalities, skin tones, languages, and customs who are all God’s children, worshipping together in the house of YHWH.

Pluralism and heterogeneity are affirmed. The Christian church is an open and welcoming institution.

### **But...**

It is also an institution that has arisen from the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He cannot be left out of the equation, as apparently some in the Ephesian church were suggesting. In the Christian community, there are no substitutes for Jesus. There are no other messiahs. Jesus is not a messiah; he is the Messiah. That is non-negotiable.

Let us remember that when John was writing these words, he was not writing a message for the whole world. He was writing to and for the early Christian church. And for Christians, there is only one way to salvation from sin and estrangement, from isolation and despair—and that way is Jesus Christ. The second issue is not unlike the first.

It seems reasonable to infer from the text that other possible messiahs were being touted and proffered to the church, and some Ephesian Christians were wondering if maybe they should shop around. Was it possible, they wondered, that these other alleged messiahs were more powerful than Jesus? Could they teach others how to be as powerful as they were?

Perhaps these early Christian searchers were saying, “Let us see what power Jesus has. If he has more power than these other gods constantly being placed before us, then we will be his, and we will discuss it no further.”

John responds with the words of Jesus, leaving no room for doubt: Jesus makes it clear in this passage that, for Christians, it is through him that both salvation and power come.

“No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.”

You hear that, right? You get that. If you want to see God, look at Jesus. That is what God looks like; that is how God acts; that is how God relates; that is how God loves—unconditionally and sacrificially. That seems pretty straightforward to me, but apparently Philip was out of the room getting a sandwich or something, because now he asks Jesus a question Jesus has just answered.

“Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.” I’m thinking Jesus is about to scream and tear his hair out. “Philip, I’ve been showing you the Father. He has been right here in front of you all this time, because the Father is in me and I am in the Father.”

We all want to see God, but we don’t notice when he’s sitting right next to us.

I saw a picture last week of a guy sitting in the bleachers watching a spring-training game for a minor-league farm team for the Houston Astros. We see him from the back—a big guy wearing a big Astros jersey with the number 34 on it and “Ryan” printed across the shoulders. It’s meant to show that the person wearing it is a fan of Astros great Nolan Ryan.

Interestingly, there's a guy sitting next to him, about an arm's length away in the bleachers—and guess who it is. That's right. It's Nolan Ryan. But the guy wearing the jersey apparently doesn't have a clue. The person who took the picture said the two men sat there for quite a while before Ryan finally got up, went over to the guy, introduced himself, and thanked him for wearing his jersey.

I was in a bookstore in Bellefontaine, Ohio, some years ago and noticed they had several copies of one of my mystery books on the shelves. I grabbed a copy and went up to the desk where a teenager was working. I introduced myself and told him I had written the book and asked if he'd like me to sign the copies there in the store.

He looked at me with this quizzical expression for several seconds and then said, "You wrote this book?"

I said, "Yeah. I'm Dean Feldmeyer, and I wrote this book."

He kept looking at me with that same expression, then broke into a grin and said, "Nuh-uh."

I said, "Yeah-huh." Then I took out my driver's license and proved that I was Dean Feldmeyer and said, "Come on—how many Dean Feldmeyers do you think there are in the universe?"

Finally, he said, "Okay," and let me sign the books. But I don't think he was ever fully convinced.

This is often the way we are with God. People write books trying to prove beyond any doubt—using logic, mathematics, and all kinds of empirical evidence—that God really does exist, when all the evidence you need is already all around you if you have just a little bit of faith: things like love, beauty, wonder, and the miracle not just of birth but of life itself. Look at the creation, and look at those who people the creation, and you will eventually be convinced that there is not only a God of the universe but a kind, benevolent, loving, forgiving, accepting God whose only desire is to be reconciled to his creation.

### **WHATEVER YOU ASK**

If you can come to terms with that, says John—if you can trust that the God revealed in Jesus is truly God—then "you may ask for anything in my name, and I will do it."

That is, if the thing you ask for arises out of your relationship with me, and you ask for it because you believe it is something I would want you to ask for and something I want you to have, then I will do it. Whatever you ask.

But that is impossible to do if our relationship with Jesus is based on a once-a-week, sixty-minute encounter that we never even consider when we aren't within the walls of the church building. We can make that kind of request only when we know with the same kind of knowing, and ask with the same kind of asking, that Jesus does.

Jean and I always say that when it comes to buying presents for each other, we are really difficult. But we're really not. We've been married for fifty-four years this July, and we know each other intimately and thoroughly. We know exactly how to make each other happy with gifts.

It's just that we want the gifts we give to be special. We want each gift to create that look of elation on the other's face when the package is opened. We want it to be the best present ever.

But the fact is, we tend to want the same things year after year, and if we get those things, we are really happy. If you're buying the present for me, that's all you have to worry about. It's when you're buying the present not for me but for yourself—for your own satisfaction, your own sense of accomplishment—that's when it tends to fall short.

John's point, and the point raised by Raymond Brown's work, is that if we want to come to know God—really know God—we can do so only through a solid, well-grounded devotion to God as he comes to us in Jesus Christ.

These other false prophets, false gods, false messiahs have no place in the faith community, where Jesus is our only Lord.

## **DEMONS AND FALSE GODS**

It doesn't take more than a few minutes to see that we are still wrestling with the same demons they wrestled with in the earliest churches. False messiahs abound.

Political parties and philosophies vie to provide us with all the answers to all our problems. Conservatism, we are told, is the only thing that can succeed in the long run. Liberals insist that liberalism is the only philosophy that actually cares about people.

They all bow down to their own gods, do they not?

Here is one called "The Free Market." Serve it well, and it will reward you with riches beyond your dreams. It's natural and reliable; it is based on the laws of nature. You can trust it.

Here's another deity called "Jobs." If we sacrifice, bow down, and worship this god, he will reward us with prosperity. Right?

And here is a third god called Power, and the one who rides with him is called Control. Devote yourself to them and you will get to make all the decisions. You will get to direct the course not just of your own life but the lives of others.

Here is the goddess Eros, goddess of romantic love. Worship her and you will certainly find that perfect mate, that perfect other who will love you exactly the way you deserve to be loved.

Can you name some others? What might they be?

Is there not a false messiah called “Self”? Ayn Rand wrote seductively of her. Is there not a false god called “Wealth,” and his brother “Success”? And here is Mars, the god of warfare, who demands the sacrifice of our children—and to whom we often sacrifice them without question or even a moment of critical thought.

And there is a god called “Love” that does just the opposite of what it promises. Last week I saw a meme on Facebook that said: “When love is real it doesn’t lie, cheat, pretend, hurt you, or make you feel unwanted. It’s supposed to be a cure for all your worries.” No, really. That’s what it said. A cure for all your worries. All. Jean, did you hear that? I’m the cure for all your worries. Every single one of them. How am I doing so far? No. Never mind. We’ll talk later.

Some of the strongest and most evil of all the false gods are, in fact, only demons who serve another more powerful than they. And the worst part is that they look so innocent, even benign. Their disguises are nearly perfect. Selfishness is disguised as love. Jingoism is disguised as patriotism. Hate and rage disguise themselves as passion and righteous indignation. And prejudice sometimes comes looking for all the world like humor.

Television supplies us with false messiahs aplenty.

I am of that generation that now stays home on Friday nights watching television, and I have come to notice that the networks know exactly who is watching on Friday nights. All the commercials are aimed squarely at Baby Boomers: Here’s that big, quiet luxury sedan with the smooth ride you always said you were going to buy. Here’s that diet supplement that will reverse your aging memory.

And if you’ve missed the strong-and-healthy train, there are other options right around you. Here’s one that smooths wrinkles, here’s one that can fix up your love life, and there’s one that can make you “regular,” whatever that means.

But watch out for the side effects. Side effects will get you every time.

Don’t you just love those commercials where they tout the wonderful benefits of a pill or ointment or cream or potion that will solve all your problems—but then there’s the disclaimer, printed so small or rattled off so quickly that you never have the opportunity to really see what you’re agreeing to?

\*May cause side effects, some serious, including coughing, sneezing, eyebrow twitching, talking too loud, not talking loud enough, dizziness, nausea, hallucinations, fits of rage, and painful death. If side effects persist, see your doctor immediately.”

The gospel writer John makes it clear once again as he speaks to the church then and now: all of these are false messiahs. Jesus is not one messiah among many. He is not a messiah. He is **the** Messiah. Jesus is the solution to our problems and the medicine for our illnesses.

And the only side effect is hope.

**AMEN**