

What if Jesus came back as a college sophomore?

I posed this question to the students in my sexual ethics class.

by [Jennifer Beste](#) in the [February 13, 2019](#) issue



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When I landed my first teaching position, I never imagined that Christian sexual ethics would become my favorite and most regularly offered course. Even more surprising to me, I would come to author a book about college parties and hookup culture.

In graduate school I had specialized in medical ethics and trauma theory, so when the chair of the theology department asked me to teach sexual ethics my first year, I had to fight the impulse to ask if he was serious. During the first few weeks, I felt my cheeks turn red when addressing certain topics and frequently wished for a magic cloak to make me disappear.

However, by the end of the first semester I had overcome my aversion to discussing embarrassing topics openly and fallen in love with teaching the course. I learned,

among other things, that students are willing to reflect critically on their own gender and sexual socialization and are eager to share their experiences and their honest perspective on college culture.

I also learned that most Christian millennials find the church's teachings on sexuality negative and judgmental, or simply irrelevant. When faced with the choice of either remaining faithful to the church's religious teachings on sexuality or pursuing peer acceptance by endorsing the culture's celebratory depictions of wild, drunken college parties and unattached hookups, many choose the latter.

Despite this choice, however, the majority feel let down by the realities of hookup culture. An alarming percentage of them (particularly women) are left to deal with negative consequences of hookups: loss of self-esteem, anxiety, depression, and a variety of posttraumatic stress symptoms. In practice, both the church and pop culture fail to give young people the resources they need to make decisions that are healthy and just for themselves and others.

If our goal is to empower young adults to follow Christ in their daily lives and make sexual decisions that foster holistic growth and fulfillment throughout their lives, simply educating youth about church teachings or even assigning the best theological texts on the subject is not adequate.

What does work, then? A text that I've found useful is Johann Metz's *Poverty of Spirit*, which explores the mystery of the incarnation and meditates on how Jesus' decision to embrace poverty of spirit and to become fully human is saving for humanity. When students come to wrestle with what it means to become fully human in matters of sexuality and relationships after having read Metz, their model is none other than Jesus.

I ask students to imagine a second coming in which Jesus (as he is described by Metz) arrives on campus. They encounter him at a bar or party, and they are the only ones to recognize who Jesus really is. I ask them to imagine engaging in conversation with Jesus about what it means to embrace poverty of spirit and become fully human. They also share with Jesus the challenges that they and other college students face in trying to follow Jesus' way of being in the world. What advice would Jesus give them?

In reading hundreds of student reflections on this imagined encounter, I've noticed three main recurring themes. First, the students think that Jesus is all about

relationships. They repeatedly describe a college-aged Jesus standing out because he isn't interested in "all of the false pretenses of college life" but instead wants to "get to know the heart of every person," as a student named Will put it.

According to Sophia, "Jesus experiences the love of God in his interactions with every person he comes into contact with so he makes the most of each and every interaction." He also reaches out to those who appear lonely, uncomfortable, or out of place. "Just as Jesus in the First Coming assured the outcasts that they did not suffer in vain, he would associate with those who suffered from the pain of not truly fitting in with the group," wrote Liam. "He would encourage them to be true to themselves."

Students often envision Jesus caring for and compassionately loving others. Nathan wrote, "Jesus would help those who make bad decisions, and not simply look away and do nothing. If he saw a girl passed out on the couch because she drank too much alcohol, he would not treat her in a way that was disrespectful. Nor would he walk away and do nothing. He would cover her up and find her friends to make sure that she had a way home."

Jesus pulls off this kind of intimacy because he genuinely accepts himself for who he is, including his limitations, and is free to be authentic with peers. As Carter reflected: "I see a man who is completely comfortable with himself and others around him. He disregards any social norms, power structures, or egoistic behaviors, and instead is able to become open and authentic, and humbly and vulnerably invest in the people around him."

Students repeatedly envision Jesus standing out from his peers by not relying on alcohol as a crutch to socialize with peers—or in Hanna's words, not feeling the need to "get ridiculously drunk to hide who he really is or portray himself as a different person."

A second theme I find is that Jesus takes every opportunity to subvert masculine norms that objectify women and use them as objects of pleasure. In his commitment to "interact with women and treat them as equals," wrote Lindsey, Jesus would never be standing around with his friends "rating girls on a ten-point scale in terms of their appearance" or, as another student wrote, "taking dibs on which one he would try to hook up with."

Furthermore, as Jordan envisioned it, Jesus would probably take heat for this countercultural respect for women: “People may put him down for this behavior, but he can handle it.” Epitomizing the very antithesis to the hypermasculinity that pervades the party scene, Jesus would “cause many people to be uncomfortable. To be completely vulnerable as a man would greatly challenge what many men think it means to be a man,” wrote Caleb.

Third, the students regard Jesus as an extraordinary teacher. Students regularly depict him simply leading by example, but he’s also effective at engaging peers in discussions about whether party norms help them feel good about who they are. Students imagine Jesus asking questions and encouraging them to think critically about how their choices affect the kind of person they are trying to become. In students’ imaginations, Jesus’ style is never “top-down” and know-it-all; he is patient, thoughtful, compassionate, encouraging, and invitational.

As they speak of their desire to embody Jesus’ way of being, the students identify the many challenges of doing so. They find obstacles arising in both their academic day lives and their party night lives. Again and again they acknowledge the pressure to worship the false gods of individual achievement, materialism, and peer acceptance. Serving these gods confers social status, which is the highest currency most students know.

These are the kinds of responses that can keep a Christian ethicist up at night, especially one who teaches not at a notorious party school but at a small church-affiliated college where the majority of students grew up going to church and where 82 percent identify as Christian. What happened to these students’ confidence in their inherent worth based on the Christian conviction of being made in God’s image and sustained by God’s unconditional love? The answer: they’ve been nurtured in a mainstream culture that enforces its own view of worth and success.

In their reflections, many students recount instances of struggling alone with problems—and often resorting to alcohol abuse to numb themselves from their emotions—because expressing the need for help signals weakness and inferiority. Pressure to achieve fuels harsh self-criticism and makes it difficult to prioritize time for relationships with God and others, to pursue their passions, and to relax. As Bella wrote, “Parents, professors, grad schools, future employers all pressure me to be the best, to stand out, and to succeed. I feel as though all my actions must reap benefits for my future, and if they don’t, then it is time wasted.”

Students also write about their failure to love their neighbor because of self-preoccupation and selfishness. Jackson noted, “Most students tend to use others as stepping-stones to get to their goals. They are so focused on their own achievement they don’t care about others. They seek others not because they want to get to know them, but in hope of benefiting themselves.”

I ask students to imagine meeting Jesus at a bar.

Yet another obstacle to neighbor-love is students’ deep fear of becoming vulnerable and authentic. The sorts of relationships called for by Jesus require being true to a wide range of emotions, which is culturally associated with weakness: “When surrounded by a status-minded social environment where weakness is discouraged, it is extremely hard to accept that it is OK to be vulnerable with others when it comes to feelings and relationships. Revealing these things will negatively impact our social standing,” wrote Evan.

Fears of vulnerability figure prominently in students’ analyses of why they drink excessively and hook up. Besides helping students escape their insecurities and stressors, alcohol seems to offer a justification for their behavior. If you hook up with someone whom your friends don’t regard as “hot,” or if you get rejected, you can blame whatever happens on being drunk, and even say you don’t remember the event. Abundant alcohol is thus more valuable than gold to college students: it liberates them momentarily from the constant fear of judgment, ridicule, and loss of social status.

Hookups are also less risky emotionally than dating or being in a committed relationship. For many, it is far easier to conform to hookup norms of being unattached, unemotional, and invulnerable than to risk sharing your authentic self and facing the prospect of getting hurt. “Feelings bring the possibility of rejection and that is something everyone wants to avoid at all costs. If feelings are not involved, no one can get hurt,” reflected Emma. “The biggest risk someone can take is to develop feelings and express them.”

A significant percentage of students (particularly women) experience loss of self-esteem, anxiety, and depression due to the way in which they are treated in this culture. Nora echoes many peers when she writes: “I know several people, myself included, who have woken up the next morning either to a reaction of ‘Oh my gosh, I can’t remember if we had sex’ or to just an overwhelming depression.”

A great deal of academic literature chronicles the ways that drunken hookup culture is a breeding ground for sexual assault. My research as well indicates that both men and women regularly experience sexual victimization and a wide range of PTSD symptoms. The reality that hookup culture normalizes sexual harassment and assault also numbs many students' moral consciences, enabling them to treat their peers like objects to be used and promptly discarded. As Jake wrote, "Male students will unfairly target the females who appear to be the most drunk since they are the easiest target to have a random hook up."

One reason I keep assigning *Poverty of Spirit* is that students readily identify with the author's claim that we all experience (as Jesus did) temptations "to renounce the poverty of our unique, mysterious personality, to do just what 'everyone else' does" in order to secure social validation." Making connections with Jesus' temptations in the desert gives students permission to be compassionate with themselves. It encourages them to explore their struggles honestly and directly, and it shines a light on a life path that is actually in their power to choose.

Christian leaders and other adults often express alarm over hookup culture because it celebrates and promotes casual premarital sex. I too find my students' social reality alarming. What is most heartbreaking to me is that students are so often dissatisfied or clearly unhappy in this culture—and yet they still opt in. They sacrifice their unique personalities to conform to party norms of excessive alcohol use, hookups, and other forms of dehumanization.

If this personal behavior is distressing, what shall we call the culture that promotes cruelty, callousness, sexual assault, suffering, and injustice, all the while anesthetizing its participants to their own emotions and obscuring the fact that such violence is actually intrinsic to the culture? Hannah Arendt's well-known phrase "the banality of evil" comes to mind.

Reading students' stories saddened me greatly when I first encountered them because I recalled how, on my college campus, it was considered normal to desire the experience of falling in love and of being in a romantic, exclusive relationship. How could social influences so quickly make youth and young adults ashamed of their most basic needs for genuine affirmation, emotional intimacy, and support? Our youth deserve so much more than having to live in a culture where simply being human—having emotions and relational needs and desires—is shameful.

It is striking to me that while most of my students imagine Jesus reacting to the college party environment with concern and sadness, not one has depicted Jesus being angry at the injustices he observes. Typically students imagine Jesus expressing regret that students' current culture is not making them truly happy. Students are familiar with the story in which Jesus becomes angry and loses his temper at the sight of people buying and selling in the temple (Matt. 21:12-13). Why, then, hasn't a single student imagined Jesus losing his temper or intervening in situations where men lead severely intoxicated women into what is likely nonconsensual sex? Have my students so internalized sexist and dehumanizing norms that they cannot even imagine Jesus' outrage at sexual assault? Where did this overly nice and sanitized Jesus originate in my students' imaginations? Is he a reflection of Christian churches' own taming of Jesus, a revelation of our failure to offer a truly countercultural vision?

As a Christian, a mother, and a professor, I refuse to avert my eyes from students' reality. What I can do is offer students the possibility of critical reflection and conversation about it. This might not seem like much of a response. But students have shown they are hungry for honest conversations about how to embrace Christ's path to full humanity.

Semester after semester I have glimpsed the fruits of cultivating dialogue on these issues. Some students write about their efforts to go out of their comfort zones and actually ask someone out on a date. They write about trying to relate to their partner more justly and consider their full humanity. They write about deciding to end relationships that are unjust and abusive. And they write about the joy that goes hand in hand with being real.

At the end of the day, all of us are called to party and relate to others the way that Jesus would. We are called daily to say yes to the challenging and risky business of authentic encounter, dialogue, and action.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Jesus at a college party."