Columns
Spirituality



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I began my teaching career in a high school mathematics classroom. Mathematics is equal parts theory and application. I do fine with the theory, to a point, but I love the

application part. I had a giant chart in my first classroom entitled "When am I ever going to use this?" with topics and applications galore. That poster was helpful inspiration for students when I was teaching “how to find x."

As my teaching subjects expanded to include computer programming and, later, theology, the need for "real life" application came along. Code writing was easy to find applications for; theology was a bit tougher.

Part of the curriculum for my class on morality involves the Beatitudes. Most adults can pull the Beatitudes, or pieces of them, from memory or lived experience. Few of my students had that background; their theology education had been more focused on the "Do Not" statements of the Ten Commandments.

My students started their study of the Beatitudes just as the last of Joan Chittister’s National Catholic Reporter columns about them was published. The timing was perfect. After reading various biblical translations, each student used one of Chittister's columns as a starting point.

What followed were intense debates and dialogues about the Beatitudes. What was Jesus saying, what was Chittister challenging the reader to consider, and what can a group of 16-year-olds in the northern United States do? We brainstormed what a world lived with a beatitude focus would look like. All agreed it would be very different than the world we currently have.

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My students asked if they could rewrite the Beatitudes for 2022: They wanted to name and call attention to the underrepresented or ignored groups that need to be called "Blessed" now. Each student created eight new beatitudes, I compiled and edited them, and — with their permission — I offer our additional beatitudes for reflection:

Blessed are those who dream and believe, who influence and inspire.

No one can achieve anything without dreaming. Dreams can lead to innovation and progress. Belief in God is important, but we need people who believe in others and themselves as well. The world is full of social media influencers. While many are less than positive role models, there are others who offer inspiration.

Blessed are those having trouble figuring out what to do with their lives.

With so many choices available it's really hard to find your true passion. A lot of people struggle with commitment. Some feel pressured, rushed and hopeless because there are so many options and so little guidance.

Blessed are those who feel/are broken.

There are more and more ways to both define and express ourselves. Among them are racial, gender and sexual identities. Judgment is quick, and understanding is lacking. Panic and fear need to be replaced with understanding, comfort and peace. Or at the very least a listening ear.

Blessed are those who fail.

Believe it or not, everyone needs to learn how to fail. Failure can bring fear, and we need to learn from that, too. Our society is focused on success at all costs, and often defined as outside of ourselves. So we all need to learn how to fail or — to say it differently — to recognize we are not the expert on everything and we all have things to learn, until the day we die.

Blessed are the moody teens.

In the third year of COVID school, teens are in the midst of relearning how to interact with peers and adults. "Attitude" is the daily lived experience to be negotiated as they strive to resume a normal life. A lot of maturing and growth is happening, and it isn't a smooth path. Patience and encouragement are needed most.

Blessed are those who struggle to find God.

Russia has invaded Ukraine. It is nearly impossible to avoid news coverage of the atrocities. Racial discrimination continues and there are almost daily reports of new atrocities involving the Catholic Church. In many ways God seems absent and people struggle to decide if they should even bother to look for God.

Blessed are the problem solvers.

Those who have given their lives' work to mRNA research, which developed COVID vaccines in record time; IT professionals who enabled people to find ways to connect digitally; and everyone and everything in between. Humans meet unforeseen

challenges on a daily basis, and it takes the problem solvers among us to keep everything going, to spread hope in the face of hopeless and despair.

And finally, my students' favorite new beatitude:

Blessed are those who are toxic.

They, too. have things to teach us. Everyone needs to learn how to "be" with each other. Sometimes the easiest way to do that is to see how not to behave, to see in others (because we don't see it in ourselves) behavior that is hurtful, detrimental, and unkind. Putting a new spin on an old advertising slogan: Who DOESN'T want to "be like Mike?"