

Because they are so deeply and desperately in love with each other, this week I warned a couple preparing for marriage that they might be in for some disillusionment in the days after their wedding.

When the romantic dream settles into the daily grind, it is natural for the happy couple not to be so happy, even though social pressures insist they should be.

I explained that they will be undergoing a lot of change and grief, and encouraged them to patient with each other, and honest, and to honor one another's honesty, even when it is embarrassing.

I spoke of Genesis 2, that God's intention for marriage is to be a sacred, loving place where two people can be in community *naked and not ashamed*, that their covenant with each other is to honor, protect and celebrate one another's nakedness--not only physically, but emotionally and spiritually too--a unique, sacred relationship where each person can freely be who they really are--good, bad and ugly--and still be totally loved.

The woman began to cry.

She cannot ever remember being in a relationship so real; it is beautiful, and rare, to be both naked and safe, to be truly oneself and also to be truly loved.

Pastor Jen sat on the same couch she did, recounting to me a conversation she had with a parishioner while I was away.

They had marveled together at how strange and sad it is that we so often feel that we have to put our best foot forward when we come to church.

Instead of welcoming one another naked and not ashamed, we expect worshipers to wear their Sunday best.

I'm not talking about clothes, per se; I mean that the church has propagated a culture not unlike Monday morning in corporate America, full of the poison of judgment based on appearances and social punishments for those who don't measure up, whether it be wardrobe or a tidy appearance of well-being.

We have unwritten performances standards, and some Sundays, it means we are nothing but performance, like actors with masks...the Greek word for which is *hypocrites*.

How sad that as a community of God's people, we can't live together feely in the garden...we have to hide ourselves behind fig leaves and fake smiles even when God is walking in our midst calling for us.

On Wednesday night at our Lenten book study, we shared a profound, at times very real and naked conversation spurred by the printed confessions of author Rob Bell, who wrote about becoming caught up in being someone he is not: a personality he names *superpastor*:

Superpastor is always available to talk to everyone and accomplishes great things but always has time to stop and talk and never misses anyone's birthday and if you are sick he's at the hospital and you can call him at home whenever you need advice and he loves meetings and spends hours studying and praying and yet you can interrupt him if you need something - did I mention he always puts his family first?...

I had this false sense of guilt and subsequent shame because I believed deep down that I wasn't working hard enough.

And I believed the not-working-hard-enough lie because I didn't function like superpastor, who isn't real anyway.

So I had one choice - I had to kill superpastor. (Bell, Velvet Elvis, p. 115)

Many of us shared in naked detail our own personal versions of supersomeone, including one of us who said poignantly, "I feel like an empty shell."

Somehow, we get so caught up in the appearance of the shell that we lose track of the seed inside.

Somehow, we so overvalue the husk that when the seed inside begins to grow, when something magical and mysterious and dangerous and expansive begins to happen in our heart--we reinforce the cracking husk and suffocate our soul.

It's understandable why we do this.

The world is not kind to the naked, the vulnerable, the honest, the cracked and creative. The seed is tender and fragile, and if the husk falls away while it is exposed to the elements, the precious life will disappear.

The seed needs the shelter of the earth to discard its shell and dare to reach and grow.

Marriage and church are designed by God to be such shelters, sanctuary for seedling souls, but too often our sin turns sacred community into spiritual death traps.

We consume rather than nourish; we stifle rather than support.

Our ancient womb, the earth, teaches us to welcome the seed and bring it to blossom; but look what we have done to the earth!

The world is not kind to the naked, the vulnerable, the honest, the cracked and creative.

All of this is why Jesus is such a disappointment, and also our best hope.

Some Greeks come and say, "we wish to see Jesus," presumably because he works miracles and teaches with charisma and authority, because he has earned a reputation for having his shell together.

They come to see a unique and beautiful husk, but Jesus insists on being a seed.

When they see him, he will be on a cross, cracked open like Communion bread, life bleeding out of him like a green stalk from a spent seed.

This Jesus is not the kind of savior we Greeks are looking for; we are far too caught up in appearances and shells and husks and facades to be enthusiastic about breaking open, plunging deeper, and falling into our future.

Theologian Robert Capon writes:

The true paradigm of the ordinary American view of Jesus is Superman...strange visitor from another planet, who came to earth with powers and abilities far beyond those of mortal men, and who, disguised as Clark Kent, mild-mannered reporter...fights a never-ending battle for truth, justice and the American way....

The human race is, was, and probably always will be deeply unwilling to accept a human messiah.

We don't want to be saved in our humanity; we want to be fished out of it...

It's not that we weren't looking for the Messiah; it's just that he wasn't what we were looking for.

Our kind of Messiah would come down from a cross.

*He would carry a folding phone booth in his back pocket.
He wouldn't do a stupid thing like rising from the dead.
He would do a smart thing like never dying.* (Capon, *The Romance of the Word*, pp. 313-314)

The problem with killing superpastor is that then he's dead, and then what?

Then we are exposed, and have no more control.

Then we are at the mercy of others, and at the mercy of God.

Then we are helpless and buried in the dark earth, like a seed, like Jesus.

Then we fall and plummet into the dark mystery that will strip us bare and do with us whatever it will...and that is far too scary for us to accept.

In his insightful book Prayer and the Redwood Seed, Morton Kelsey writes:

We die daily and rise again.

*With each step we venture further into a strange new world, inexhaustible in depth and mystery;
it is so easy to lose one's way.*

Sometimes these births seem like inner crucifixions....

How many times I find I must be born again.

Unless I lose my life I do not find it.

Sometimes I get very tired of all this growth....

One telling difference separates the redwood seed and the human spiritual embryo.

When water seeps through its shell, then a tiny sequoia breaks forth. It has no choice.

You and I can resist this final birthing process.

We can set our feet against it and remain a stone...

And this is hell. (Kelsey, pp.55-59)

There are those of us who are so scared of the uncontrollable mystery or so in love with our superselves that we will refuse to let them die.

Some of us will choose to harden our husks into stone, and suffocate the perilous possibility inside of us.

When Jesus continues to invite us to cast aside what we call our lives and follow him, we will continue to refuse, because it's more manageable to be a shell in hell than a helpless seed in a hostile world.

Some of us will go to our graves with souls suffocated by uncracking husks, with printed instructions and extra money for the mortician to patch up and pretty up the shell one last time.

For us, Jesus the stupid dying messiah is such a disappointment, and also our best hope.

When he speaks of plummeting to his hideous death, he names it "being lifted up."

And he makes a terrifying promise:

And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.

Except the word isn't really "draw," which is good, because of us refuse to be drawn in.

The word is the fisherman's word for drawing in the nets, which is more like drag or haul.

It is bumpy and unpleasant over water and rocks and sand, all the kinds of things which crack open husks and shells and pretenses and appearances.

All people, he says, and I imagine that many of us will go kicking and screaming.

But what about those of us who have chosen hell?

When Greeks like us come to see Jesus, we are directed to look at the cross.

Because hell is the pathway to heaven.

The death we dread is precisely the painful road to our life.

And like it or not, we will be drawn, dragged, heaved and hauled home to the stifled
splendor of who we really are.

This is more than a possibility--this is a promise.

There's nothing we can do to hasten it, soften it or stop it.

Superyou will die.

And real you will live: naked, honest, raw, real, wondrous, deeply and desperately loved.