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The Skull: *Faith and Forgiveness.*

Years ago, Wendy and I took our kids to the Pueblo dwellings, some of which were built into cliff sides, and which date back 700 to a thousand years. At one of the sites, there was a display showing a human skull that had been uncovered at one of the sites. The reason the skull was there was to show us that the molars inside the skull were badly worn down. The sign said this was because the Pueblos had used sandstone to grind corn, and so when they ate cornmeal, they were also chewing on grit. The skull, of course, also reminded visitors that long ago real humans lived there, but they were all dead. The skull represents death to us.

Here is how Luke describes Jesus' final minutes before death on the cross, in Chapter 23, verses 26 to 34:

²⁶ And as they led him away, they seized one Simon of Cyrene, who was coming in from the country, and laid on him the cross, to carry it behind Jesus. ²⁷ And there followed him a great multitude of the people and of women who were mourning and lamenting for him. ²⁸ But turning to them Jesus said, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. ²⁹ For behold, the days are coming when they will say, 'Blessed are the barren and the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!' ³⁰ Then they will begin to say to the mountains, 'Fall on us,' and to the hills, 'Cover us.' ³¹ For if they do these things when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?"

³² Two others, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. ³³ And when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. ³⁴ And Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

This is a complicated scene. Jesus is carrying his cross, and clearly having difficulty, and so a man named Simon is recruited to carry it for him. But much of this passage consists of a prediction made by Jesus. He's telling people to not weep for him. The people of Jerusalem and Israel should worry about themselves. We then get to the place where Jesus will be crucified. Jesus proves at the end to live by his own words by offering forgiveness. Let's look at all of this more closely.

First, we read that Roman soldiers force a man called Simon of Cyrene to carry his cross. The cross weighs perhaps a bit less than a hundred pounds: maybe Jesus is too weak after being beaten to carry his cross. Interestingly, Cyrene was in today's Libya, on the African coast, about 850 miles away; we presume that Simon came to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover – thus, he would have been a very devout Jew. As Jesus and Simon of Cyrene proceed, a great crowd follows, loudly lamenting for Jesus.

But the community of Jews have largely turned on Jesus, apparently disappointed that he is not a worldly Messiah who will raise an earthly army and destroy the Romans. Still, there are many who still believe in him and they do not

abandon him. Jesus turns to these people, and addresses them as *“Daughters of Jerusalem”*, which is apparently a reference to the Song of Solomon, where this term is used several times. Jesus is noting that these are Jewish people who live in the greater Jerusalem area. And this might be an acknowledgement that women are more likely to believe in him than men.

But this is where Jesus moves the discussion beyond the immediate scene, his pending crucifixion. Right up to his death, his concern is for the future of the People of God. Jesus repeats a warning that he has already given twice as he was approaching Jerusalem in his final days. He is saying that these people who are crying for him should not be sad for him, but rather, they should be worried about themselves and their children. You would be better off not to have children at all, right now, he is saying, then to have them live through the suffering that is to come. He describes complete destruction, saying: ³⁰*Then they will begin to say to the mountains, ‘Fall on us,’ and to the hills, ‘Cover us’*. Jesus is clearly referencing the Book of Hosea, where we read:

- ⁷ *Samaria’s king shall perish
like a twig on the face of the waters.*
- ⁸ *The high places of Aven, the sin of Israel,
shall be destroyed.
Thorn and thistle shall grow up on their altars,
and they shall say to the mountains, “Cover us,”
and to the hills, “Fall on us.”*

In Hosea, the author is using a botanical metaphor to describe God's judgement of Israel when the People of God sin. Jesus then goes on to say, *"For if they do these things when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?"* He is calling himself green, but the people of Jerusalem dry. If Jesus can burn so easily at the hands of evil people, given that he is alive spiritually and filled with sap, just imagine how those who have no spiritual sap, who are not innocent, will one day burn. It is believed that this is in part a reference to the burning of Jerusalem at the hands of the Roman army, which will occur in the year 70 A.D. in about 35 years. Jesus is warning the people of Jerusalem that what the Romans are doing to him will pale when compared to what the Romans will eventually do to all of Jerusalem.

When Jesus says, *"³¹ For if they do these things when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?"*, he is also reminding the reader of Ezekiel, Chapter 20, where Ezekiel prophesizes: *"Thus says the Lord GOD, Behold, I will kindle a fire in you, and it shall devour every green tree in you and every dry tree. The blazing flame shall not be quenched, and all faces from south to north shall be scorched by it. ⁴⁸ All flesh shall see that I the LORD have kindled it; it shall not be quenched."* Ezekiel had warned the people of Israel that God does not put up with evil, and when the people of God stray away from the way God wants them to live, God will come down brutally hard on them. Jesus is drawing a parallel here between Old

Testament vengeance and what will happen to Jerusalem in the future. In other words, Jesus is saying that the people of Israel should not underestimate the pain to come. It will be terrible.

We see that Jesus, since he is being followed by Jews who have accepted him as their Messiah, along with those who have rejected him, and of course Roman soldiers and authorities, is speaking directly to the people of Jerusalem. This is why he predicts the future by using words that they will recognize from the mouths of two of the great prophets, Hosea and Ezekiel. This is visceral moment. Why is this happening? Why does Jesus do this as he is being led to his death? It's simple. He is still Jesus, even though he is about to go through a horrific ordeal. He knows that his suffering will end. His bigger concern is us. He is worried that those who should be living by the will of God will instead abandon the New Covenant life of faith, that they will reject God's forgiveness, and instead continue to emulate the lives of the pagans who surround them, largely by worshiping idols. Jesus is warning us that spiritual death is worse than physical death.

We then get to the place where Jesus will die. A criminal is placed on either side of him, on their own crosses. Today, we call the place where Jesus was crucified Calvary, which comes from the Latin word "*calvaria*", which means "skull". Luke calls the place "The Skull". Why this area was called The Skull we don't fully

know, but the area where we believe Jesus was crucified is a hillside with two large sunken holes, and some say it looks like a skull. As Jesus hangs on his cross, after all the suffering he is going through and is still about to experience, he offers up his own forgiveness by saying: *“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”* This is an incredible act of forgiveness, offered while Jesus is at the height of his torment. Jesus has gone from worrying about our future to offering forgiveness.

Crucifixion is meant to be horrible, with the victim often taking days to die. Jesus dies far more quickly, apparently in about six hours. Jesus has been whipped, beaten, and has carried his cross part of the way. Death by crucifixion typically comes from asphyxiation, when the condemned is exhausted and can no longer hold himself up with his feet. Once the condemned can no longer lift his chest up, the weight of his body draws his diaphragm down, causing air to move into his lungs and stay there. If you can’t exhale, you can’t breathe. Imagine how people would protest today if we were to carry out capital punishment on someone and death took six hours to a few days. We don’t know who invented crucifixion, some believe it was the Assyrians or the Babylonians, two enemies of the Israelites, but either way, it was invented to be painful, humiliating, and time-consuming.

Notice that Jesus offers two things to the people around him in this passage: first, a warning about the punishment that God will bring to his people, apparently

in the form of the Roman army that will one day destroy Jerusalem, and second, an unconditional forgiveness for those who are in the moment torturing and killing him. God offers completely unconditional forgiveness, but God does not free us from the harm we can do to ourselves. There is another way to look at this. We may be dried and brown, totally lacking in spiritual sap and ready to burst into flames when exposed to the evils wrought upon us by our fellow humans - but God forgives us regardless. God is not brutal and unforgiving, like humans. God could be, if he wanted, the biggest bully imaginable, capable of making humanity suffer in ways that we cannot even imagine. However, God is kind. Humans, in contrast, when given power, tend to exercise that power in grotesque ways. Much of what is wrong with our modern world has to do with people who wield political, economic, and military power to serve only themselves. They do not serve other people, and they certainly do not serve God.

On this Good Friday, we can thank Jesus Christ for offering us a standard of forgiveness that we can strive for throughout our lives. This is a forgiveness that, like Jesus, we should be willing to offer even to people who have done wrong. We can also thank Jesus for challenging us to withstand the temptation of power, to not become corrupt when we are capable of exerting control over others.

The word “Good” in Good Friday derives from the notion that a good person is pious, and so “Good Friday” means “Holy Friday”. It’s a day when we strive for holiness, to forgive without exception or reservation, and to treat all people with respect and kindness, by using the power we have in life to serve rather than to abuse.

The skull represents death to us. Maybe that’s why they called the place where Jesus died The Skull. But that symbol of a gruesome human death is in truth a symbol of spiritual life for us – because Jesus chose his most horrific moment to give us what just might be the most important advice humanity could ever receive. Jesus challenged us to live by the New Covenant, and to forgive absolutely and unconditionally. And he challenged us to take whatever power we might accumulate on this planet and wield it with kindness and grace.

Getting back to that skull with the worn-down molars, the skull of an ancient Pueblo Indian who had lived about a millennium ago, we note that the human skull represented death to ancient peoples, as well, because that is typically the last thing that survives after a body decays. Jesus died at a place called The Skull. We don’t have his skull – but we do have his commandments to have faith in God and to be forgiving. That is what remains of the human who was Jesus.

Amen.