

October 5, 2014

TEXT: I Corinthians 1:18-25

TITLE: Stumbling Blocks of Faith

The Germans call them “stolpersteine.” Walk down a residential street in many German cities and among the sidewalk paving stones you might see one covered with a brass marker. If you bend down to read its inscription, it will list a person’s name and note that he or she used to live in the house right there - but because they were a Jew, they lost everything, as the stone notes their death in concentration camps like Dachau and Buchenwald. The article I read on this topic called these markers “grim monuments to past misdeeds.”¹ But the German name to me is even more graphic – “stolpersteine” – stumbling blocks.

Stumbling blocks trip us up; they slow us down and make us take note of something. The German brass markers call to mind the tragedy of the Holocaust. But “stolpersteine” can be much more personal. A photo of a loved one who’s deceased can stop us in our tracks as we remember our loss. Looking in the mirror at a scar from a mastectomy surgery can call to mind memories of what life was like before the word “cancer” entered your personal vocabulary. On the other hand, “stumbling blocks” need not always be negative or depressing. They can be opportunities to pause and give thanks for the gift of life itself. You stumble and remember a similar moment from your past that makes you shake your head and smile. In fact, aren’t most school reunions or family gatherings spent telling embarrassing stories from the past – remembering the time when you ran the wrong way in the football game, or when your jeans split open in 7th grade English class, or when you were on the farm feeding the pigs as a little kid and your oversized rubber boots got you totally stuck in the mud. Okay, maybe those are just the stories at my family gatherings.

Stumbling blocks are a global phenomenon. You stumble upon the brass plaques in the streets of Cologne and Berlin and remember the concentration camps of World War II. You walk through Tiananmen Square in Beijing and stumble over the memories of tanks confronting protesters. Try to think of Cambodia or Vietnam without stumbling over their stories of killing fields. Visit the American border area with Mexico and see if you don’t picture migrant people dying in the desert led by unscrupulous human coyotes. Sometimes “stumbling blocks” are huge memorials, like the 9-11 memorial in New York City or the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City with its memorial field of 168 empty chairs. Sometimes stumbling blocks are items we see in the news today. See a photo from Ferguson, Missouri and think about racism in America. Hear an interview with Rep. Gabrielle Giffords and reflect on how poorly we deal with violence and mental illness in our society, as well as how we are “stuck on stupid” when it comes to gun control and the Second Amendment. Drive past a VA hospital or see a reservist who lost a leg to a roadside bomb and wonder when we’re finally going to follow the advice of the old spiritual and “study war no more.”

I mention all this because stumbling blocks have often been interpreted to be negative things, as barriers to faith. When Jesus told his disciples about his coming trial and arrest, Peter pulled him aside and insisted Jesus stop talking crazy talk. Jesus rebuked him and called him a “stumbling block,” relying on worldly wisdom instead of heavenly truth (Mt 16:23). But stumbling blocks are not just hindrances to faith. They can also be necessary parts of faith. Jesus would later quote the old scripture about “the stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone” (Mt 21:42). The stone that slows you down, that causes you to reflect on which path you’re following in life, can become the crucial stone – the building block to a new life altogether.

I Corinthians is a letter Paul wrote to a conflicted church fighting over everything possible. They were divided over rituals and relationships – whether Paul, Peter or Apollos was best – whether the ways of the Jewish law or Greek philosophy were wisest. Paul doesn’t take sides or tell them to sing “Kum ba yah.” He warns them that they have let worldly things distract them from what truly matters. They needed to focus on Christ crucified, even though that faith story trips them up - as he said, it’s a stumbling block to Jews and intellectual foolishness to Greeks. Yet Paul rightly insisted it is that “stolperstein” alone that can bring them lasting peace.

One of our neighbors just had her last dose of chemotherapy. Thankfully her prognosis is good. She has lost all her hair, so this lovely wife and mother is now totally bald. To look at her is to stumble over all the past niceties you might have spoken if you met her months ago and talked about the weather or the kids or the Steelers. To look her in the eyes now, and to do so with love and gratitude for her strength and faith, is to stumble for words but then find yourself in a different place altogether - a place where the stuff that truly matters is right in front of you.

Paul didn’t have chemotherapy to get the Corinthians’ attention. But he did have the cross. Most churches have crosses in them, but we don’t really look at them or allow ourselves to stumble over them as we ought. Well-coifed preachers, stadium seating, even beautiful cathedrals like this one can too often distract us from what the cross compels us to see and remember. Every cross is a double symbol: the grim instrument of Jesus’ crucifixion and the glorious reminder of Christ’s resurrection. The cross reminds us that when we tried to push God out of the world, God refused to leave. The cross reminds us that even when we give into our worst and most violent inclinations, God’s love remains unconquered and undeterred. Theologian H. Richard Niebuhr wrote: “The cross does not deny the reality of death. It reinforces it [but] denies its finality.”²

Paul pointed the fractious church in Corinth to the stumbling block of the cross and said point-blank: *The message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.* The cross’ message of sacrificial love is foolishness in the power-mad, “let’s bomb Syria” and “let’s arm school crossing-guards” world in which we live today. The cross’

message of Christ dying for us while we were unworthy is incomprehensible in the prestige-honoring, white-privilege-protecting world in which we live today.

Yet when we look at a friend's face no longer framed with hair after her chemo treatments – when we notice a limb now missing after a soldier's chance patrol on a dusty Iraqi road – when we read a brass plaque silently testifying about the Holocaust - we stumble over our old ways of doing things. We stumble over our old foolishness that, yes, mostly worries about how to live well before we die – as opposed to asking how to lose our life so we might truly live once and for all.

In this passage, Paul is writing as a pastor to us. His words cup our chins as our eyes glance down to see what we've stumbled over. Then he gently raises us up and says, "*To us who are being saved [this good news] is the power of God.*" Our ears perk up. Paul has said this is for us – our circle of stumbling folk who happen to find themselves gathered around a cross and included in a story of love that will not let us go. It is something personal. It is for right here and now. But it is also a process. Paul didn't say we are "saved"; he said we are "being saved." David Buttrick used to call the church the "being-saved-community." Basically that means, Christ ain't done with any of us yet.

In life, everyone stumbles. Paul then points to the cross, and joyfully proclaims, "to us who are being saved the power of God is at hand." Last question: Who's in this "to us being saved" group? Well, we're not the ones to set that boundary; only God does. So ask yourself: Who would God keep outside of this group? Why would it ever make sense to insist that God's circle of salvation is small and just restricted to "us"? The beauty of a circle is that it can be extended in all directions without ever losing its form or shape. That is part of the joy at the heart of World Communion Sunday. We - all people, all lands, this world – are one, "being-saved-community" welcomed around one table. As we stumble forward and share this meal, we are able to see through our tears and our laughter what really matters. See how a heavenly promise has been kept. Feel a love that will not let us go. Know this is for all and for always. Thanks be to God.

¹ Nicholas Kulish, "In Rwanda, Finding Echoes of Germany," *New York Times*, May 9, 2014.

² H. Richard Niebuhr, *Theology, History, and Culture*, ed. W. S. Johnson (1996); quoted in *Feasting on the Word*, 1 Corinthians 1:18-25, Third Sunday in Lent.