

STUMBLING BLOCKS

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1 Corinthians 1:18-24

Imagine that you are visiting the beautiful nation of Germany. You are in the capital city of Berlin and you are walking around exploring admiring the sights. You find yourself in a residential section of the city—in a neighborhood of buildings that are at least a century old. And as you walk down this quiet street, you stumble. You don't stumble because the street is paved with cobblestones (which it is). You don't stub your toe on a curb or trip over a grate. What you stumble over is a small brass plaque—a plaque that is perfectly flush with the ground. You stop to look at this shining object set among the gray cobblestones. There are words engraved in the brass. The words are in German, but you can recognize there is a name, and a date, and then a word that you have seen before—Auschwitz. You begin to understand.

This plaque that you have discovered was placed here by a German artist named Gunter Demnig. Mister Demnig first conceived of this idea of placing these plaques in 1992 as a way to commemorate victims of the Holocaust. The inscription on each plaque that he has placed begins with the words “Here lived,” followed by the name of the victim. There is also their date of birth, and their fate whether it was internment, suicide, exile, or deportation and murder. The memorials are not just for Jews (although they constitute the majority) but for the Sinti and Romani people, the disabled, homosexuals, the resistance, and others.

Mister Demnig, who just turned 72, calls these plaques *Stolpersteine* [shtol-pe-shtein-ne]. In English that translates to Stumbling Stones. The word stumble has the same pair of meanings in German as it does in English. One can ‘stumble upon’ something as an accidental discovery. “Today, I stumbled upon a great coffee shop that I didn’t know about.” Or, one can ‘stumble over’ something that causes them to trip. “Walking down the hall in the dark last night, I stumbled over the dog.”

The artist of these plaques intends that people accidentally stumble up and discover the *Stolpersteine*. And he also wants the plaques to cause people to literally stumble, to stop and take pause.

Each stumbling stone is small. They consist of a cube of concrete that is 10 centimeters on each side. (10 centimeters is roughly 4 inches.) The brass plaque is 10 centimeters square and is attached to the cube. The entire piece is set in the pavement in the street or sidewalk at the location of the last voluntary home of the person being memorialized.

There are many stories about the setting of these stones. It is not uncommon for neighbors on a street or the residents of an apartment building to band together

and research their street. The project requires that extensive investigations be conducted. Biographies of the victims are written and posted to a website. Surviving family members—if any—must be contacted and informed of the *stolperstein*. It is not uncommon for family reunions to be organized around the setting of the stones. It is a somber experience for those involved.

Each *Stolperstein* is made by hand. The brass is formed by hand and each letter is struck by hand with handmade tools. All of this is done intentionally to guarantee that the process as intimate and as personal as possible. Originally, Mister Demnig made each stone himself. But because of the sheer numbers, he now has partnered with another artist to perform that task while he oversees the installation of each stumbling stone. As of this date, he has installed over 70,000 Stumbling Stones in Europe and Russia. There are even *Stolpersteine* outside a German school in Argentina. This project is the largest decentralized monument to the Holocaust in the world.

The term stumbling block has a rich tradition in our holy scripture. We find it first in the book of Leviticus in this simple prohibition, *you shall not put a stumbling block before the blind* (Leviticus 19:14). That, of course, would be cruel. Leviticus gives us one of the few occurrences in scripture where a stumbling block is an actual physical object. In most instances in the Bible, a stumbling block is a metaphor. Usually, a stumbling block is a metaphor for sin—something that keeps us from God, something that comes to causes us to stumble on our journey toward God. The prophet Ezekiel talks about the *stumbling block of iniquity* (Ezekiel 14:7). Sometimes a stumbling block can be a person or a people. The prophet Malachi denounces the priests at the temple in Jerusalem as being corrupt and sending people astray. He writes, *You have caused many to stumble by your instruction* (Malachi 2:8). In some cases, a stumbling block has been placed by God in order to highlight the sins of the people. In the book of Jeremiah for example, the prophet writes, *Behold, I will lay before this people stumbling blocks against which they shall stumble* (Jeremiah 6:21). The prophet Isaiah goes so far as to have God become the stumbling block that exposes the sinfulness of the people.

A stumbling block is something which causes us in the regular course of events to trip and stumble and possibly even fall. A stumbling block changes our trajectory. Stumbling blocks can be personal. One might be a photograph of someone we've lost. Or a scar from a surgery. Or a song on the radio that forces us to stop and remember. If we are on a path towards God, sin becomes our stumbling block that sends us astray. If we believe we are leading righteous lives then God may place a stumbling block in our way to demonstrate that no we are not.

Stolpersteine are powerful stumbling blocks in that they are reminders of the great sin in which the world averted its gaze as millions of innocents were killed.

The notion of the stumbling block is not limited to the Old Testament. We can also find them in the New Testament in the gospels. For example, *If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to enter life maimed or lame than to have two hands or two feet and to be thrown into the eternal fire* (Matthew 18:8).

Luke tells us that as followers of Christ, we must be mindful not to lead astray any immature believers: *It would be better for you if a millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea than for you to cause one of these little ones to stumble* (Luke 17:2). When Peter objects to Jesus' prediction of his own death, Jesus says to Peter, *Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me* (Matthew 16:23).

While stumbling blocks are referenced in the gospels, it is in the writings of the apostle Paul that this term truly finds a home. The church in Corinth asked Paul if it were okay if they consumed meat that has been sacrificed to idols. Paul tells them that food is just food. However, if their actions have a negative effect on other Christians, then then they should abstain. Paul writes, *Take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak* (1 Corinthians 8:9).

In our reading for today from 1 Corinthians, the meaning of a stumbling block finds its ultimate expression in the theology of the cross. The cross is, of course, the object of Jesus' execution. How can we claim that Jesus is our Lord and savior—the son of God—if he died on a cross. The cross is for criminals. A person of greatness would not end up on a cross. A savior would save himself. What kind of savior do we venerate that couldn't save himself? This was a question put to the early Christians, a question the world could not wrap its head around.

As a missionary, Paul would establish himself in a city like Corinth and gather a group around him teaching them the message of Christ. The group would grow until it became a worshipping community. In time, with the church on its feet, Paul would leave and move on to the next mission field. The members of the church would continue to spread the message of the gospel through the city. Invariably, the members would run into objections to the cross. People would say, “You want me to place my faith in someone who was crucified, someone who could not save themselves? That makes no sense. I don't want to side with a loser like that.” When the believers in Corinth asked Paul how they should respond, he writes, *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.*

Our world operates according to some basic norms—the norms of power, wealth, and influence. Paul identifies these norms as *the wisdom of the world*. The followers of Christ seek to live in another world—God's world—a kingdom which operates on different norms. What we may find wise in our world is foolishness in God's. It was exactly this ‘wisdom’ that led to the crucifixion of someone sent to us by God with a

message of love and forgiveness. It was this 'wisdom' that led to millions being killed in the Holocaust. It is this 'wisdom' which makes the cross the ultimate stumbling block—a perpetual reminder of the presence of power and sin in our world.

Behind me is a cross. It is not a decoration, it is not a symbol. It is there to call to mind God's power to bring salvation to the lost. May it cause each of us to stumble and become stronger in our relationship with our Lord. Amen.¹

¹ A good video about Stolpersteine.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8kZEolbz07M>