

Stolperstein isn't a very familiar term. Indeed, it is not English but German. It is the term that literally means stumbling stone or stumbling block. The term describes 4"x4" concrete cubes that rise up off the ground in various cities within Germany. Brass plates are affixed to the cubes with the names of Jewish individuals with their birth dates and dates of death inscribed upon them. The locations of the Stolperstein are the places where Nazis arrested Jewish individuals and sent them to the concentration camps. Literally, people in Germany stumble over these memorials on a daily basis. The Stolperstein exist as a critical--and unavoidable--reminders of this very tragic part of German history. Communities in Germany elected to use the cubes as one way to keep the legacy of Nazism squarely in front of them. And by doing so, even the most mundane location becomes not only a teaching opportunity but a memorial so that the innocent will not be forgotten.

Furthermore, the use of the Stolperstein was a way to subvert a common narrative within the German culture. Prior to World War II there existed a German phrase that was often said whenever someone stumbled over a rock. "A Jew must be buried there," was the expression. Thus, the use of the Stolperstein became a way of transforming an Anti-Semitic slur into a way of remembering Jewish victims and furthering efforts to end Anti-Semitism in Germany and intolerance everywhere.

Indeed, this effort by the Germans has been studied by others, particularly Bryan Stevenson who is a lawyer and leads the Equal Justice Initiative. Stevenson recognized the ubiquitous memorial narrative in the South was largely one of honoring the various southern generals and battle sites. One way of addressing this has been to call for the removal of the various statues and plaques that memorialize these individuals and locations. And while this may end the visual landscape of a particular memory in the South, it does little to address the narrative that was never allowed a voice in public: namely the reality for slaves and the legacy of slavery.

Stevenson and his organization studied the Stolperstein project in Germany as well as other efforts to remember the legacy of apartheid in South Africa and the genocide in Rwanda. While efforts to end intolerance and further the understand of the legacy of Anti-Semitism or slavery or genocide must be multi-faceted and permeate the culture, this one act of reclaiming the narrative seems crucial.

Thus, Stevenson and the Equal Justice Initiative began introducing various memorial plaques to sit alongside statues and memorials that already existed honoring generals and battles. These plaques, however, told a different story. They told the story of individual slaves who were murdered or lynched in a particular location. These plaques told stories about the locations where humans were sold into slavery and referenced in a catalog where one could buy a human along with a cart or a cow or any other implement. They told stories about Jim Crow laws that

continued to keep African Americans enslaved in a new way long after the Emancipation Proclamation. With these plaques, the hope is that the fuller story is told and a crucial context is never forgotten.

Which, when it comes right down to it, seems to be such a major part of our life together in the Christian community, that is, trying to remember and acknowledge what reality truly is. A friend once commented, “Why do we need to confess sins? It is such a downer!” And while acknowledging where we have missed the mark may not be our favorite thing to do, it is crucial to our abiding in reality. Furthermore, confession must not simply exist as a guilt-inducing downer. Rather, confession exists as the counter narrative that keeps us grounded and reminds us--like the Stolperstein or the Equal Justice Initiative plaques--that there is a larger context in which we reside. We are responsible for our actions, AND, at the same time, we participate in systems that act in ways that are unjust or cruel or even criminal. And while we may struggle to understand how to respond to these larger realities, we cannot deny our place in that narrative. Thus, the next time you confess, perhaps it is not as a way to remind yourself how guilty you are, but maybe, just maybe, it is an act of resistance.