

Cemeteries

As a lay minister for Grief Recovery over the last 20 years, I have stood shoulder to shoulder with friends and family as they laid their loved ones to rest. I visit my family at a “new” cemetery (founded less than twenty-five years ago) to spend a few minutes with those whom I have loved so dearly. I often look out over the landscape of the cemetery and see a temporary tent for a pending interment or a fresh mound of dirt that is marked with flowers in various stages of decay. Markers will be installed on the flat terrain in a matter of weeks. Headstones are largely a thing of the past.

I recently spent time in the Czech Republic, Austria and Germany. On almost every tour I took there was a stop or a conversation on the local cemeteries. I came to recognize that the reverence of honoring the final resting place of family and friends had been observed or obliterated based on culture, political or religious context over the centuries.

In Nuremburg, the cemeteries are like great floral displays, bursting with color which filled the onlooker’s eye with joy. No doubt the smell would have been wondrous, but from the bus window the affect was still breathtaking. In that particular location, the burial plot is “rented” for 20 years. The thought being the current generation in mourning, would tend the grave. Thus, the flowers are an outward sign of the love held by the survivors. After the twenty year rental, the body is moved to another location and a newly dead person is buried in the same place for another twenty years by another family.

Flowers have been a tradition for centuries when our modern refrigeration and embalming were not the cultural necessities of today. In the holy lands, the fragrance is not flowers, but one of the spice - Rosemary - the fragrance of remembrance. It is used to hold the memory of the loved one in the hearts of these who grieve.

Among the cemetery stories told during my trip, the brutal tales of Nazi Germany’s intent during the 2nd World War to remove all Jewish people from Germany and the occupied countries, was often mentioned. Every effort was made to kill the people, destroy homes, business, Synagogues and especially cemeteries by the ruling Nazi government.

In Prague, however, the Jewish area ghetto (neighborhood) was not destroyed during the war, because the Nazi’s wanted to “preserve the way the city looked as a museum, to show future generations of Germans how an extinguished race had lived”. As a part of the preservation, the Jewish cemetery had also been preserved. Over the ages the cemetery, due to the city walls, had no place to expand, so they used a method of adding additional space to bury the dead by adding a new layer of soil directly on top of the previous layer. There were twelve burial layers in the cemetery spanning over three hundred and fifty years. Each time a new layer was added, the headstones of the precious generations were raised up and replaced on the top of the new level of ground. Imagine visiting your parent’s burial plot which could have had up to twelve stones lined up over their grave. The experts estimate that one hundred thousand were buried there over the generations. The land settling and sinking over the years, makes the headstones appear today as the waves of the stormy waters of life. The headstones dip and bob and shift over time as they have settled, causing some of them to lean on one another for support.

In most German cities, the soldiers were instructed to pull up the headstones at the Jewish cemetery. The headstones were to be crushed for roadway construction. In one town, the Protestants intervened by collecting and removing the stones before they were destroyed. They hid them in their homes to prevent their destruction. They later replaced the stones when the danger had passed. The interesting part of the story was the original headstones placed by the Jews all faced West. The Protestants, not knowing the tradition, set them up facing East. The town and the remaining Jewish population determined that in honor of the effort, the stones would remain facing East. That cemetery may be the only Jewish cemetery where the stones do not face the traditional direction.

In another town during the Night of Broken Glass, the headstones were pulled up at the cemeteries but instead of being destroyed were brought to homes of the wealthy Germans where they were plastered into the outer wall of houses to demonstrate their support of the Nazi regime. Some of the headstones are still seen in the walls today.

In recent excavations in Poland, headstones from Jewish cemeteries were found to have been used as part of the foundation in Nazi building projects. Gardens and walkways were built of the headstone materials because of the high quality of stones. One Jewish cemetery was overlaid by the Nazi's with an athletic arena.

Ponder the horror of attempted eradication of God's chosen people. The death and the destruction wrought on lives plus the humiliation and outrage of the families who had buried loved ones and ancestors which were desecrated by a ruthless dictatorship bent on total annihilation of their race. The tragic story of the Holocaust magnifies for us the untold suffering of the people who were chosen for no other reason than that they existed.

In 1992 a movement was begun to create markers for those who had been swept away into camps or mass graves without a trace. Brass plates (about four inches square) engraved with names of those who had lived or worked at shops are being placed in the sidewalks across Germany. Since there are neither bodies nor cemeteries to commemorate the deaths, the *Stolperstein* serve as a reminder that these people did exist.

How then will we honor our loved ones at the grave site- with flowers, frequent visits, and decorative plaques with bible scriptures or phrases that show our love for our beloved? If the columbarium is the final resting place, strolling to the small niche on a Sunday to touch the engraved plate becomes the honoring gesture and brings comfort. But is that enough? No matter where our loved ones are laid to rest, no matter how sacred the soil or location, they are but dust as the days pass. The real honoring of our loved ones is not in a location, but rather in our hearts where we hear the words of our Savior from the cross. "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise". (Luke 23:24) For heaven is our final resting place.

Do we purchase a perfect plot or a niche? Perhaps we should spend our efforts on witnessing to those we love about the love of the Lord. We should be spending our energy insuring their final resting place is in heaven, not where man can ignore, desecrate or destroy.

May God's peace rest upon you.

In the hands of the Savior.

Sharon Fox

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