

The Lives of the Faithful whose Names are Long Forgotten

When I stepped into Sunday worship a couple of years ago at the red-doored Grace Episcopal Church in Galena, Illinois, I immediately felt surrounded. Not just by worshipers in front of me and a small choir squeezed behind the pews in back of me, but by a host of congregational saints whose names adorned plaques bolted to the walls.

I sat directly beneath one massive bronze slab dedicated to ‘The dear memory of Lucille Goodman—1833-1910—*She hath done what she could.*’ My mind flipped between wondering how badly I’d be maimed if Lucille fell off that wall and wondering what her epitaph was meant to suggest—each consideration presenting me with its own sort of encounter with God.

Was Lucille a woman who poured out her life extravagantly for others, like the anonymous woman who broke an alabaster jar to pour a costly ointment onto the head of Jesus—that one of whom Jesus said, “She has done what she could”? (Mark 14:8). Or was Lucille’s life limited in some way by a terrible tragedy or disability that she heroically strove to transcend? Maybe her life was just ordinary, in the best sense of the word, and she was content never to have to feel she needed to achieve great things.

It is the last possibility that captures me. When I asked Grace’s rector Gloria Hopewell if she had any further historical background on Lucille, only three things surfaced from the archives: Goodman confirmed her faith in 1861, she was single, and she died of apoplexy, better known to us as a stroke or cerebral hemorrhage.

In a world where people are expected to excel, average achievement almost sounds uncouth. It certainly isn’t celebrated. Benchwarmers, daydreamers, and piano players who practice incessantly but live with the knowledge that they will never be better than OK—these sorts of people don’t make it unto bronze plaques. In a world of intellectually sophisticated, athletically fit, and financially wise (or lucky) individuals, to be classified as ordinary is almost insulting.

It doesn’t have to be this way, of course. While many of us are gunning for peak experiences, the dramatic encounters with God, and exceptional displays of prowess, I imagine Lucille being unafraid of tackling the mundane. Like Jimmy Carter in his post-presidency years signing up to mow the church lawn every two weeks, as Rosalynn cleaned the church bathrooms inside, Lucille may have relished the benefit to others of performing rather routine work. French Jesuit priest Pierre Teilhard de Chardin once described such an approach to daily life: ‘What matters is not to do remarkable things but to do ordinary things with the conviction that their value is enormous.’

Let Lucille Goodman represent the communion of saints. She does it well. Her epitaph—*She hath done what she could*—is a legacy we should all be proud to have as our own.