

Everyone has heard of the Titanic. Even before the 1997 movie the sinking of the Titanic was the most famous shipping disaster in history. But why have so few people heard of the General Slocum?

Until the Titanic sunk in 1912, the destruction of the General Slocum was the world's worst shipping disaster in terms of loss of life. The General Slocum caught fire less than eight years before the Titanic went down. Like the sinking of the Titanic, the General Slocum disaster resulted in the loss of over 1000 lives. Like the Titanic, the General Slocum saw many women and children among the victims. Like the Titanic, the General Slocum disaster could have been averted (or at least lessened) if better safety measures had been in place (in the Slocum's case, the fire hoses were in such poor repair that they disintegrated upon use, and the life preservers were rotten and sometimes even filled with metal to give the appearance of usefulness). And like the Titanic, the General Slocum was a "New York" disaster, covered by all the New York City newspapers (the Titanic was headed for New York when it sank; the General Slocum caught fire in the East River off of Manhattan).

So why have most people never heard of the General Slocum?

It's partly because of the ship itself. The Titanic was the largest, grandest vessel ever built when it launched. The General Slocum was an old, oversized steamboat. It's partly because of the passenger list. The Titanic carried some of the finest and most important members of American and British society. Many of its victims were famous people. The General Slocum had been rented that day by St. Mark's Lutheran Church of Manhattan to ferry its members to the annual church picnic on Long Island. Its victims were almost all poor or middle-class German immigrants. The loss of their lives simply wasn't as big a deal to the newspapers as the loss of the famous people who died on the Titanic.

The media was (and continues to be) fickle like that. When a famous person dies, it's big news. When someone we love dies, it may merit a mention in the obituary page of the local paper, but that's it. And when we die, the world will hardly take notice.

Does that mean our lives are unimportant? Not at all! "For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works" (Ephesians 2:10a). Elsewhere in Scripture God calls us the "salt" and the "lights" of the world. Though the world can't detect it, God has taken us and made something special out of us. We may never gain fame in this world, or even the appreciation of the world, for doing what we do as Christians. But we continue to do those things - showing kindness to others, raising our families according to God's Word, inviting our friends and neighbors to church and to their Savior - because we seek to please our God and thank him for all he has done and does for us.

And when we leave this earth, it does not matter what the newspapers or the TV anchors say about us, if they say anything at all. What does matter is what our King will say to us - the same King who suffered and died to forgive us and make us his children: "Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world" (Matthew 25:34b).

What has God given you to do today? Rest assured, no matter how small it may look to you, it's important. It's a privilege that the God who saved you invites you to share in his work here on earth. And whatever you work at today, work with the knowledge that God's blessing rests upon your efforts.

Prayer: Dear Father, thank you for treating me as somebody important - important enough that you sent your own Son to save me. Help me view my daily responsibilities as opportunities to give back to you. May I carry them out with love toward you and other people. Hold before my eyes the vision of life eternal with you in heaven. In your Son's name, Amen.

Written by Pastor Steve Schmidt, Ascension Lutheran Church, Jacksonville, NC. Worship with us on Sundays at 9AM. Check out our website at www.welsal.com.

Publication and redistribution of this meditation is permitted, so long as the text is unaltered and the author is credited.