

On interring 300 persons known to God alone

By [Steve Woolley](#)

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Recently I helped inter the remains of almost 300 persons who had been lingering, unclaimed, on storage closet shelves in the county coroner's office. Some of them had been there since the 1940s. Most are men; some are women. Maybe a third bear the name of "Baby Boy/Girl, Unknown." Our city cemetery made space available for them all in a new public crypt. A local monument company provided a memorial bench engraved to honor the unclaimed and unknown lying within. Prayers were offered from several traditions: Christian; Jewish; and the spirituality of the Umatilla, Cayuse and Walla Walla tribes.

It is tearfully sad to think that a baby can be born into this life full of promise and potential only to die unmourned, unclaimed and unloved. The deuterocanonical book of Sirach reminds us that, while we might sing the praise of famous men, "of others there is no memory; they have perished as though they had never existed; they have become as though they had never been born, they and their children after them. But these also were godly men, whose righteous deeds have not been forgotten."

Godly men of righteous deeds might be a stretch. But they are not forgotten. Surely they are among the least of these for whom our Lord came that they might have abundant life. We don't know their stories, but I suspect that in each of them was some failure by the rest of us to offer water to the thirsty, food to the hungry and clothing to the naked. Perhaps we were moved in that direction but stopped to decide who was deserving and who was not. Who can say?

In any case, the jars of ashes that are their earthly remains are off the shelf, out of the closet, and repose in space made sacred by prayer and song. I wonder about the ones born today who will someday join them. The neonatal nurseries of St. Mary's and General Hospital are filled with such promise and potential. Why must any of them die unmourned, unclaimed and unloved?

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