

Nurses' Sabbath May 6th, 2023
NAD Sermon

Welcome:

It was about 0830 in the morning, and I was in the hospital getting report at the nursing station. I didn't realize it then, but I would soon to be playing rock paper scissors, over a patient. As I took down notes about the patients on our list left over from the weekend team, I quickly picked up that there was 'a patient' that I would probably be the one to evaluate and discharge home that morning. It sounds awful to say but, it's the kind of patient that those of us in healthcare have all worked with—the one whose self-destructive behavior led to their admission in the first place, whose angry expletives towards anyone who stepped into the room, make you sigh before you enter the room. The one patient, where a negotiation takes place to see whose turn it is next, to answer the call light, or to make rounds on, because we're just hoping to get in and get out of the room unscathed.

Good afternoon and, greetings from Andrews University. It is a pleasure to be able to spend some time with you today, sharing about the love of Jesus, and His mysterious leading in and around our lives, while drawing your attention to the intersection of healthcare and ministry.

I'd like to thank the North American Division team: Dr Angeline D. Brauer, our Health Ministries Director, Kathleen Woodfork Coleman, President of Adventist Association of Faith Community Nursing and their incredibly helpful team for making this possible. It is because of their vision, that today Sabbath, May 6th, we recognize and honor our healthcare professionals with special attention to our nurses, on this, National Nurses' Day.

As I stand here today, I wish I could see your faces and expressions to know how many of you are in the healthcare field. You'll quickly pick up that I am not a pastor, and I am not particular comfortable with public speaking especially in this type of setting. My goal in this short time however, is to weave a story alongside a spiritual lesson as I've seen my favorite pastors do, in a way that I pray will be both enlightening and, inspiring.

As a nurse I started out in Orthopedics, then transitioned to the one area that intimidated me the most; Cardiology. Then at the turn of the century, (that sounds very funny to say), I finished grad school and became a nurse practitioner and settled into what else, but Cardiology where I've spent literally decades, and loved every minute of it. It was only recently I found myself embracing the academic space to share my passion with emerging nurses. They say 'time flies when you're having fun' — and true to form, it really has flown by!

I've had numerous experiences that many of you have had and some of you may have yet to have.

For example, if you've been in healthcare longer than a moment, I imagine you've also held your patient's hand and cried with them and their families as they've learned about a frightening diagnosis or death of a loved one. Perhaps you've commiserated with your co-

workers as they tried to power through another shift, convinced they wouldn't get a break for the next 12 hours while many of their friends and family mostly had 9-5 jobs Monday through Friday, or now a day, the luxury of working remotely. Many times it feels that we carry the weight of the world on our shoulders, especially over these past few years.

Well, I'm here today to celebrate the different members of the healthcare team, especially our nurses, and want to encourage everyone in my hearing that you are not here by chance. For that very reason, our sermon title today is 'Lift Him up, tis He that bids you'!

Please turn with me to our scripture reading, John 3: 14, 15 then John 12: 32 (I will be reading from the King James Version) ... believed to be the words of Jesus Himself.

Slide 1 John 3: 14, 15 "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have eternal life." He goes on to say in John 12: 32 "And I, if I be lifted up from the earth will draw all men unto me."

Let us pray.

Let thy words through my mouth and the meditation of our hearts, give us a greater understanding of the work you have called us to do on your behalf. Oh Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen

Working with large Cardiology groups, I've enjoyed both a clinic practice and an inpatient practice. As was customary when we rounded in the hospital, we would huddle in the morning to divide up the patients for discharging, rounds, procedures and admissions. As we sat at the nursing station going through the list that morning, my colleague pointed to the name of a patient and started to tell the story of how this person was found unconscious on a sidewalk downtown 10 days prior, and was brought into the hospital. The person was noted to have an abnormal EKG, elevated Troponin (indicating a possible heart attack), congestive heart failure, high blood pressure, a blood alcohol level 3 times the legal limit and, a drug panel that was positive for illegal substances and, let's not forget, bacteria. The echocardiogram showed a weak heart muscle, severely impaired and vegetation lurking on key valve structures. After over a week's stay in the Cardiac Intensive Unit on antibiotics and life sustaining medications, they had finally stabilized and was hopefully ready for discharge today—this is, if everything looked ok on the heart monitor. Homecare was already set up and they would be discharged with a PICC line for 6 weeks of IV antibiotics. Sending someone with a history of IV drug abuse home with an IV line doesn't sound like a good idea, but it was necessary. And with periodic drug testing, we could see if the individual continued to use and if so, the IV line would be taken out and treatment stopped. Patients had to understand the seriousness of their condition, and agree to abstain from drugs, and comply with all follow up testing. They were sick and quite frankly, just luck to be alive.

As I stood there, listening to the conversations about how difficult this person was to deal with over the weekend, and how exhausted my colleagues were from working with increasing numbers of people with drug addictions. The discussion grew into wondering why patients like this didn't get a palliative care consult since they were likely going to continue to use drugs and have a bad outcome anyways. Have you ever been so impressed, that you were convinced you were hearing the Holy Spirit speaking to your conscience? As they spoke, the following words were seared into my consciousness, "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me".

Silence.

'I'll take the patient'. I blurted out.

'Barb, you don't mind to go see this patient?' My colleague chuckled and said 'You seem to do pretty good with patients like this. I just can't deal with all the drama.'

'Yeah, of course, I've got them.' I figured it was easy enough to do the discharge and get the follow up all arranged. Deep inside I was thinking the patient may even qualify for a defibrillator down the road if the heart muscle didn't improve with therapy—that is, if they could stay clean.

We finished morning report. I checked the monitors, vital signs- they were all good, then headed to the room, took a deep breath and knocked at the door.. 'Good morning !'

Moral distress and internal conflict that come with caring for others is not unusual in any given day in the life of a nurse, a doctor, a respiratory therapist or other team member. Patients just aren't always predictable and often don't follow instructions for a variety of different reasons—some of no fault of their own. I'm guessing you too may have been in similar patient situations. There is also a lot of pressure to care for sicker patients with less manpower. We transfer them out of the ICU's earlier and onto floors where staffing and skillset don't always align with the needs of the patients, and go on to discharge them earlier from the hospital to subacute spaces where again, staffing and skillset don't always align. That makes it so hard to provide the quality of wholistic care that you wish you could provide. Despite this, healthcare costs continue to raise and to drive the complex system we work and live in. And over the past 3 years of a pandemic, things just continued to go south. In fact, we saw devastating effects on team morale, staffing etc, resulting in more and more healthcare workers calling it quits, burned out and leaving the profession. It's so hard to give of yourself when you don't feel whole. Moral distress is embedded in everything I've just described.

And this is exactly why we celebrate those who choose to commit their lives, their talent, their passion, to this service. To His service.

Slide:2

Why are healthcare workers resigning?

More than half (57%) blamed staffing shortages for the lack of care, and experts told HealthDay Now that these folks aren't wrong. Nurses, doctors and other health care workers are burned out after three years of the pandemic, and some are choosing to leave the profession, the experts said.

“Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me”. Have you ever taken care of a patient that was someone famous? A president of a company? Someone that you might have thought was special in some way? There was such care in the way you spoke to them, and you might even have gone out of your way to make sure they got the perfect amount of attention while they were in your care. If you were assigning staffing for that day, you would have made sure there was no way the unit was short staffed. Everything would be perfect, kind of like when Joint Commission comes in for a visit. What if the patient were God himself!? He calls us, to care for the least of these, with as much love and compassion as if they were our own family, better yet, as if they were the God of Heaven, the ultimate VIP. Our human tendencies lead us to look up to or look down at people and even gauge the level of attention they receive-- based on their net worth, their occupation, sometimes their ethnicity and color of skin, or rank in an organization. The Bible cannot be clearer that this manmade system is just that—a puny manmade system. Galatians 3:28 says ‘There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus’. Inasmuch. Remember that.

Slide 3 *Insert

In 1943 Dr Abraham Maslow, a Psychologist introduced us to a theory model to help us understand what motivates human behavior. Without spending too much time on it, what we do see is that it proposes that in order for humans to fully develop one’s talents and potential, represented as the top of the triangle, there are some very basic needs that are to be met, seen at the base. For example air, sleep, food, water, a place to live. In other words, if someone is living on the streets, it might not be reasonable to expect they will have the interest or opportunity to become an engineer or the leader of a large corporation. While they may have the potential to be a world changer, the odds are slim to none that they will ever shine as one who was in a nurturing environment.

The logic seen in how Christ approached mankind leaves no surprise that He was as effective as He was. When here on earth, He cared for everyone, even those that others turned their backs on. The book Ministry of Healing tells us that Christ’s method alone will give true success in reaching people. It says that the Savior mingled with people as one who desired their good. He showed sympathy for them, ministered to their needs, and won their confidence. Then, he invited them, ‘Follow me’.

It is interesting to note that healthcare overlaps naturally with the first 4 items. I feel as if that easily falls within the job description of an Nurse, a nursing assistant, a surgeon, a social worker and so many others. It's not uncommon for patients and care givers alike to be drawn to each other during their interactions over the course of the illness, and have a special bond for some time after. Now, I'm not advocating for healthcare persons to take on the role of our clergy. Not at all. While Maslow didn't say it, and the description of Christ's ministry does come right out and say it, we see over and over that Jesus met people where they were at, fed and healed them and they were naturally drawn to Him—not the other way around. Basic needs were met and then, they were able to think beyond their own needs, and seek to do God's will. What I'm saying is, we are a great team in partnership with our ministerial teams!

Slide 4 Katie Willard Virant MSW, JD, LCSW, "The existential crisis created by the illness experience—the "dark night of the soul"—hits us spiritually. If we once felt cared for by God, we may feel abandoned. If nature used to give us solace, we may now feel unmoved by it. If our relationships made us feel connected to something larger than ourselves, we may feel isolated from the very people who once meant so much.

There's a pattern here that's worth noting: Where once we felt connected (to God, to nature, to important others), we now feel utterly alone."

Our world is so broken even more so now after the assault of the pandemic. It seems increasingly dangerous, making it harder to mingle with others especially when we're so tired and focused on our own needs, we fail to see what they need. People are increasingly distrusting and not at all sympathetic towards others, and it often seems safer to trust no one. It's like we are living in the perfect storm. How would we even follow Christ's model? Just think what would happen within our communities, our families, if people reached out to God instead of reaching out to destructive habits to get a short break from this madness we call life?

Slide 5: ...His cause today is in great need of the living representatives of Bible truth. The ordained ministers alone are not equal to the task. God is calling not only upon the ministers, but also upon physicians, nurses. [The Review and Herald, April 7, 1910.](#)

And so, I gently opened the door and peeked in, introduced myself to the patient and explained why I was there. I saw a 60ish year old person lying in bed, hair was a mess, hands were rough and nails were uneven and dirty. The patient was worn and a noticeably disheveled. They looked up at me and quickly looked away, and asked 'when can I get out of here?'. They were not impressed that I had advanced cardiac life support expertise and a graduate degree, or that

my lab coat was crisp and freshly ironed, or that I was having a good hair day. They probably were used to being judged and so I said a quick prayer hoping that whatever I said would be well received and somehow represent the One who had guided my own career path so many years ago. I had no intention to preach at or preach to this person and I had no idea how me being kind and compassionate would draw this person to Christ. But, I pulled up a chair and sat beside the bed, reviewing the recent medical happenings, new diagnoses and plan of care, pausing periodically to see if there were questions I could answer. I went over the medications and plans for follow up. I carefully emphasized that they were being sent home with an IV line for antibiotics and that drug testing would be done at regular intervals. They expressed an interest in getting help to clean up and I provided contact information for support groups in their general area. Again, I asked if there were any questions as I got up to leave. No questions. That was much easier than I thought it was going to be. As I neared the door to leave, I heard 'Barbara?' I turned around to look back towards bed. 'Thank you.'

'You're welcome', I said and closed the door behind me.

Let's take another look at our Scripture reading, John 12:32 'If I be lifted up, I will draw all men to me'. What does it mean to lift Him up? If I claim to be a Christian, could it mean that I strive to show people who Christ really is? And that I strive for my words and actions to represent Him? While we might not be pastors, our role on the healthcare team as small as you may think it is, can be made

Slide 6 John 3: 14, 15 "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have eternal life."

Now let's be clear, in both of these verses, Christ was referring to His upcoming crucifixion, and the plan of salvation. But I can't help but wonder if healthcare doesn't somehow tie in with that. When Moses lifted up the rod and serpent, it was to 'show' the Israelites this symbol, as God had directed. The Israelites were sick. Do you remember the backstory for this verse? In Numbers 21, we learned about the Israelites complaining and complaining against Moses (it seems to be a favorite pastime for them) for taking them out of Egypt. I suppose enough was enough, and soon snakes started to appear in the campground-- they bit and killed many of the Israelites. The Israelites then prayed that the snakes would be taken away. So God told Moses to make a bronze snake and put it up high on a pole and later, if a snake bit someone, if the person looked up at the snake on the pole, they would live. The snake and the pole became a symbol of healing to the Israelites! And funny enough, we see something similar representing healthcare today! The World Health Organization has a similar symbol, as does the field of Medicine- granted they relate the origins to Greek Mythology. But I see healing and the gospel represented in these same images. And the most beautiful thing for an overworked healthcare worker to see is His promise that comes later in John 12:32. And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to Myself. To me, that means that if I show love, and represent God's

love in the way I care for others in our healthcare ministry, He will do the heavy lifting. Did you catch that? Jesus said He would draw all people to Himself. And for a nurse, not having to take on one more thing is indeed a blessing in itself!!

A month or so after the incident in the hospital, I was at church one Sabbath. It was an ordinary Sabbath and as usual, early in the service, someone official welcomed the members and visitors and invited the regular members to welcome those around them and especially, any new faces. I happened to be on the Praise Team that week. As we split into harmony singing, ... I glanced around the church and saw a lot of familiar smiling faces singing along with us, and a handful of visitors that week, following the words on the screen. But one person stood out. It was a familiar face, but someone I thought was new to our church. It made no sense whatsoever.

We finished our 2 verses and as the musicians kept playing, the praise team went into the audience and also greeted members and visitors.

I didn't know if I should do it or not, but I immediately went over to the visitor that I had never before seen 'in our church'. I was shocked-- it was the same person that I had met in the hospital months prior only this time, all dressed up. They were seated beside two other people. Of course, I've lived in a world where HIPPA is the guardrail for almost every word that comes out of my mouth, and that Sabbath afternoon was no different. I didn't know if the people accompanying 'my' patient knew about the recent hospitalization or of the struggles that got them admitted and, it certainly wasn't my place to disclose such personal information. So instead, I extended my hand for a handshake and said, 'Welcome!' – I'm sure my face could not hide my surprise. 'My name is Barbara, I. I don't know if you remember me or not, but we met a couple months ago. It's so nice to see you here today'. I shook the other guests' hands and welcomed them also.

'Of course I remember you'—their knowing smile, was just what I needed to see.

I would be lying if I told you I didn't shed a tear as I returned to sing with the praise team.

Ok, so please tell me. How did that patient end up at my church? I had never met them prior to the hospitalization and do not recall ever seeing them in the church before. Was it someone that used to go to the church? Was it someone that randomly happened to choose our church? I know I had not breathed a word out loud about God to them and certainly did not invite them. Did God randomly impress on their heart to go to church? Or, did they always go there and I'd just never noticed them? I will never know the answers to these questions—and I've accepted that. But every time since then that I've heard John 12:32 read, I think of the powerful lesson I learned through that experience. I hoped they realized how fortunate they were to have survived their recent ordeal, but I feel like I got to share in the blessing. I walked away with a much deeper understanding of how God can work with whatever efforts I lay at His feet. I hate to think what would have happened if I had walked into the hospital room that day with an attitude or had been judgmental. Can you imagine how we both would have felt seeing each

other that Sabbath afternoon? And remember, I was up front—there's no way I could have hidden!

Did you always know that you would be in the health field? For me, I have to admit, 'I have no idea how I got here – I had no idea that I would one day be this lucky!' For as long as I have been in the field, I have had the absolute pleasure to watch in awe, on a regular basis, the masterpiece of God's creation, the human body, healing itself as it was designed to function. And when that failed, I've seen the miracle of modern medicine, I believe--divinely inspired, kick in. And when that too failed, so many times I've seen His hands, take the wheel, allowing sick people to recover, getting discharged when I was sure they would not make it to the next shift- much less the next day. If you've been in healthcare for any longer than a moment, you know exactly what I am talking about.

And what I didn't tell you earlier, is that I'm very much an introvert. So how does an introvert find herself speaking to you today? Or in front of students and other groups of people on a regular basis?

Maybe you can personally identify with the irony of this, especially if you are also an introvert--and wondered, how did you find yourself in an equally high stress profession that demands engagement with so many people at every turn—people everywhere, in different roles on a healthcare team? How did you get to be in a place where you would be advocating for patients and families at their most vulnerable times, and too often at the brink of death?

How did we end up here? The words of the song 'It's All God' captures the answer most accurately – If I was just anybody, I'd say hmmm 'it's all good' but I know better. It's all God! It never was about me, it's because He had a plan for my life, that I could not see for myself.

Today we want to celebrate our nurses, and I'm happy to point out that in 2022, for the 20th year in a row, Nurses lead in the Gallop polls as having high honesty and ethics at 81%, which is 14% higher than the second place runner up—also a healthcare profession.

Perhaps you are a nurse, a doctor, counselor, nurses aid, physical therapist—whatever your role is in the healthcare team, you are making a meaningful difference in people's lives. You also are privileged to see from the front seat, how God uses you, your talents and steady hands to be a blessing to people sometimes in the scariest times of their lives, or to share in the most vulnerable, or happy times in their lives. To lift His name high, through your service.

Thank you for committing your lives to this work, as challenging as it can be at times; and thank you to those who are considering a career in this field. If you say 'no' to the calling, you can be sure that God will call someone else, because revealing His love will get done with or, without us. His work goes on. But is it not the sweetest thing to know that He may be calling you to play such an important role in His plan, at just a time like this! A time when our world is pulling apart at the seams, as it were.

I pray that He shows you His power, gives you grace, wisdom, courage, strength and peace. I pray that He fills in the gap for you in whatever way you need Him to, as you care for those you have been entrusted with.

God bless you all and, Happy Nurses' Day!