

The Lady With the Lamp

Historians regard Florence Nightingale as the founder of modern nursing. She was born to wealth and privilege in England on May 12, 1820. A deeply religious person from early in her life, she became one of England's greatest women of the Victorian Age. In 1854 when England and France went to war with Russia in the Crimea, she was already devoted to a career in nursing. Florence Nightingale went to the Crimea with 38 nurses seeking to bring some order out of the terrible chaos and suffering being experienced by British soldiers. In an old Turkish barracks she set up a hospital, beginning with the most horrible conditions. When she arrived the wounded lay on floors bleeding and uncared-for. But under these conditions she soon began to treat the wounded soldiers. At night, carrying a single candle inside a circular collapsable shade, she walked the four miles of corridors bringing hope and the touch of human kindness to countless soldiers. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow gave fame to this nightly sight when he wrote of her in his poem, "Santa Filomena:"

Lo! in that house of misery
A lady with a lamp I see
 Pass through the glimmering gloom,
 And flit from room to room.

And slow, as in a dream of bliss,
The speechless sufferer turns to kiss
 Her shadow, as it falls
 Upon the darkening walls.

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A Lady with a Lamp shall stand
In the great history of the land,
 A noble type of good,
 Heroic womanhood.

The light that she carried has come to mean several things. It means, of course, care for the sick; it means care for the ordinary soldier; and the freedom of a woman to choose her own work. In Victorian England it was shocking to see a woman devote herself to nursing in this way.

This morning I want to invoke the image of "The Lady With the Lamp" as we consider one of the most comprehensive of all human ministries. It is significant, I believe, that our church, and many other denominations in their history, have founded hospitals and nursing schools. The presence of these institutions of healing and nursing are direct and logical consequences of our theology about the mercy of God. One of Jesus' beatitudes from the Sermon on the Mount is "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy." No Christian oriented hospital could be more appropriately named than "Mercy." You can tell a Christian by the quality of mercy which he or she shows toward others. In throwing light upon this beatitude George Buttrick pointed out that:

 "The Romans despised pity. The Stoics might
 offer succor, but they looked askance at

compassion. The Pharisees were harsh in their self-righteousness: they showed little mercy. (see Matthew 23:23). Besides, the commonly accepted explanation of suffering saw in it only the deserved punishment for sin. So Jesus here took sharp issue with his world. In the carillon of the Beatitudes this bell could ill be spared." Interpreter's Bible, V. 7, p. 284)

Wherever you see a Christian hospital or a Christian nursing school, you may be sure that Christians have been sounding this bell of mercy.

It is time, therefore, that those who devote themselves to the knowledge and skills of rendering mercy should themselves obtain some merciful gratitude from us. How we take them for granted, but when we are in desperate need of skilled, merciful care how we expect them to be there to minister to us! What they do is, indeed, a ministry.

Most of us wince and turn away from the sights of life in its rawest, roughest, most repellent scenes. O, we may be fascinated as we pass an accident scene at night, with police and ambulance lights flashing, but after a quick look we pass on, our appetite for gore quickly satisfied. We assume that someone, somewhere, no doubt nurses and doctors in a hospital, will be able to care for those who have been savaged by violence and bloodshed. Perhaps we are not aware that nurses, for example, witness life in its rawest and roughest forms. In a hospital, attired in a hospital gown, a patient is a human being stripped down to the barest essentials of his or her being. Here all pretense dissolves, all cosmetic embellishments are wiped away, all power and prestige reduced to zero. Now the human being, once pretentious and demanding of others, once false in appearance and demeanor, may look like a shivering bowl of jelly, fearful, cowardly and desperate. Of course, where persons had never pretended, never hidden behind cosmetic personalities and phony claims to preeminence, the inner soul may shine forth as faithful, courageous and trusting. There is no other profession on earth that sees so many people as they really are as do our nurses. Their views of human nature range all the way from hearing the primordial scream to beholding the countenance of those who seem to have the "peace that passes all understanding."

In the last two years I have come to have an even deeper appreciation for those nurses who have acquired the skill and dedication, and the love, to minister to both those being born and those who are dying. Almost two years ago I walked into the critical, intensive care unit for newborns at Lutheran General Hospital in Park Ridge. There were nearly 40 newly born babies, all of them struggling with some serious disability that accompanied them into the world. At each station there was a crib with a tiny baby, tubes and wires going every which way, there being so many charts and graphs that I was left bewildered. But in two of those little cribs were my twin grandsons, born six weeks early. A battle was being waged to save their precious little lives. And beside them was a nurse who had paid a tremendous price in training, knowledge and skill so that these little boys could live. And as I looked around there were many nurses in that large room ministering to these many tiny creatures who were struggling to

gain a small foothold in this world. How I marveled at their knowledge and skill, how I thanked God for their caring love, nursing and nudging most of these children of God across these perilous thresholds of life. The room was brightly lighted, but standing out in that brightness were ladies with lamps.

And then, just a little over two months ago I received a call - I was here at the church - that my mother, after a long and anguishing illness, had died. Rushing to the Pine View Care Center I found the nurses and nurse's aides who had cared for her so lovingly and tenderly, still in her room where her lifeless body lay. And I learned that one dear and lovely young aide had been with her, at her bedside, when the quiet end came. I looked into her eyes and I saw the tears of love and caring, just as they had been there during the weeks that my mother was slipping away. The shades of the room had been drawn, and we were in semi-darkness, but I saw a "Lady With a Lamp."

Of course, not all people working in the healing ministries care as much as most, any more than all ordained ministers of the gospel are truly caring persons. Alfred Lord Tennyson wrote a poignant poem which he called "In the Children's Hospital." It tells of a conversation in a hospital between a nurse and a doctor. The nurse says that she felt a chill in her heart when she first encountered the doctor, "Fresh from the surgery-schools of France and other lands." He had "Harsh red hair, big voice, big chest, big merciless hands!:" Then the poem continues in the words of the nurse:

Here was a boy - I am sure that some of our children
would die

But for the voice of love, and the smile, and the
comforting eye -

Here was a boy in the ward, every bone seem'd out
of its place -

Caught in a mill and crush'd - it was all but a
hopeless case:

And he handled him gently enough;
but his face and voice were not kind,

And it was but a hopeless case, had seen it and
made up his mind.

And he said to me roughly, 'The lad will need
little more of your care.'

'All the more need,' I told him, 'to seek the
Lord Jesus in prayer;

They are all His children here, and I pray for
them all as my own.'

But he turned to me, 'Ay, good woman, can prayer
set a broken bone?'

Then he mutter'd half to himself, but I know that
I heard him say,

'All very well - but the good Lord Jesus has had
his day.'

O, how could I serve in the wards if the hope of
the world were but a lie?

How could I bear with the sights and the loathsome
smells of disease

But that He said, 'Ye do it to me, when you do it to these'?

Surely Tennyson, to, was hailing "The Lady With the Lamp."

I am sure that not every skilled and dedicated nurse sees nursing as an expression of the Christian faith. Some become nurses out of a love for humanity, not necessarily because of a love for Christ. But in the New Testament Christ himself tells us that we honor and serve Him when we perform deeds of caring - feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick. In these present days some nurses are getting terribly discouraged because our society is overworking them while withholding the recognition and honor they are due. There are more nurses working today than ever before, but there are also greater demands on nursing than ever before. My daughter, Debby, who is a Clinical Nurse Specialist in Houston at the famous M.D. Anderson Hospital that treats cancer patients, tells me that they have a serious shortage of nurses. The San Francisco General Hospital - where the nurses wage is higher than almost any place in the nation - reports that they are down 10% of nurses altogether and that they are down 20% in the Emergency department.

Nurses are said to be very tired. Now, thanks to the AIDS epidemic, their work can be very risky. There is a constant battle between quality care and safe-care. The physical and emotional endurance of nurses is being stretched to the limit. Nationally there is a need for an additional 165,000 nurses in hospitals and nursing homes.

On a TV program this past week about the nursing shortage, one nurse expressed her agony about not having the time to spend with patients in their deep needs. She told of stopping by the bedside of a young man who wanted to talk to her, but she had to move on because there were too many other patients to see. That young man died, and she said she felt horribly depressed because she could not linger to visit with him. Obviously what churches need to do is to call attention to nursing as one of the most crucial forms of Christian ministry. We need to encourage more of our young people to make their decision for Christ a decision to enter the nursing profession.

I am deeply proud that I have a daughter and a daughter-in-law who have expressed their love for Christ through nursing. To me they are ministers even more than I.

Perhaps you have never thought of nursing as being a form of ministry. But nurses are closer to all of the vicissitudes of human life than those of us, actually, who are ordained clergy. They are present when babies are born. They nurse children through early illnesses. They are present when we need surgery. It is to them we often turn when we are afraid of dying, wracked with pain. It is they who are present when the joy of health returns and their care has been successful. It is they who hear our most searching questions about the meaning of life and death. It is they who care for us when we are totally helpless, when we are old and depressed in nursing homes. And have you ever thought that they serve as priests for our last rites? Even the Roman Catholic Church allows them to baptize human souls when no priest is available in an emergency.

Many years ago a distinguished theologian, Walter Marshall Horton, wrote about a girl who was brought to a hospital late one

night. She came from a disreputable quarter of the city and had led a dissolute, wasted life. In a violent scuffle she was critically injured. And now in a hospital she looked up into the face of a caring nurse. After a long silence the girl asked the nurse: "Do you think that God can forgive one who has lived as I have?" For the next several moments the nurse searched her own soul and faith, as in a prayer to Almighty God. Finally she said to the girl, warmly and firmly gripping her hand: "Yes, yes indeed, I know that God forgives you, and loves you." After a while the girl closed her eyes and slipped into the silencing stream of death, but with the peace that passes all understanding on her countenance. You see, she had seen a light in the face of an angel, the "Lady With the Lamp."

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