

Sermon – March 12, 2023

Pastor Dan Hollis

John 4:5-14

It might surprise you to know that I have a favorite triangle. It's probably a surprise because that's just a weird thing to say. But my favorite triangle is what's known as "Maslow's hierarchy of needs." It's a theory in psychology that describes the physical and emotional needs of human beings, and it's usually represented on paper as a triangle. At the *bottom* are the most *basic* needs: things like water, food, sleep; and it moves up, through increasingly abstract categories, like safety, belonging, esteem, beauty, and self-actualization.

The countless needs you find in that triangle have always been a helpful reminder to me of the kinds of needs that *exist* in this world, and the kinds of needs that *I* might be having trouble naming for *myself*.

Maslow's theory also suggests that it's harder to meet the needs that sit higher up the triangle if you haven't met the needs lower down, and that's another reminder I wish more people thought about more often. The other way to put it is: it's easier to meet those higher-order needs if the foundational needs are met. Nobody self-actualizes on an empty stomach. It's hard to heal the spirit when you're dying of thirst.

One reason that I love this triangle is because of my profession. My calling. As a pastor, my work is all about seeking to meet the spiritual needs of others. And this triangle can help to remind churches that the work of mission and charity and service can't be left *out* from the work of spiritual growth and healing. They're inseparable.

If the lower needs on the triangle are about *surviving*, and the *higher* needs are about *living*, then it feeds *into* itself: you can't *live* if you aren't *surviving*... and it's *living* that gives survival *meaning*.

As Christians, we should always be seeking to learn the needs of those around us—our neighbors, our fellow children of God—and we should seek to *meet* those needs, physical and spiritual. But it's not Maslow's triangle that's telling us to do that. It's Christ.

Take today's Scripture reading. Jesus Christ, in journeying from point A to point B in his ministry, takes a shortcut through the land of Samaria, and one day he hikes up a mountain to the site of a well sacred to both Samaritans and Jews alike.

But Son of God or not, he's exhausted from the hike, and when he sees a Samaritan woman drawing water from the well, he surprises her by asking for a drink. And *more* than that, he *offers* her something to quench *her* thirst... not the thirst of her body, but a spiritual thirst. He offers her *living* water. A water that quenches the deepest of thirsts, and anyone who drinks of it will never be thirsty again. And we see *throughout* Jesus' ministry just how freely this living water flows. It heals, it rejuvenates spirits... it changes lives.

Now, if we, here, in 21st Century America encountered some random guy on the street who offered us *endless* water that would cure all our thirst... and it was free? You don't drink *anything* a stranger offers you. Especially if he says it'll solve *all* your problems, and *especially* if he says it's free.

But God has made it clear again and again that God doesn't want *anyone* to go thirsty, or to feel empty, or to know true loneliness.

Isaiah 55: "Everyone who thirsts; come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price."

Revelation 21: "To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life."

And... John 4: "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked *him*, and he would have given you *living* water."

But the Samaritan woman at the well had every reason to distrust this man asking her for water and offering her priceless gifts. Because he wasn't *just* a homeless vagabond, and he wasn't even *just* a strange man while she was a woman alone. Because he was also Jewish while she was Samaritan.

Samaritans and Jews had a shared origin, far back enough that neither group could remember all the facts... but, long ago they were split apart by geography and the shifting political landscape, and over generations the two groups began to diverge more and more. And when they found each other again, their differences had become very apparent. They had a *few* things in

common at the foundational level, but beyond that things started to get more complicated.

The things they *believed* and their opinions on the ways they should *live* were totally different. They couldn't even eat at the same table. And all these differences led to tensions and even hatred and violence.

That's why Jesus' famous parable of the "Good Samaritan" is such a powerful lesson. It's a story Jesus told to say that there is no *limit* to who your neighbor is, and there's no *limit* to the love God calls us to *show* to our neighbors.

And so today we find Jesus not *telling* a story *about* a Samaritan, but actually putting his foot where his mouth is and *talking* to one. And God forbid, asking one to hand him a drink of water even when she'd get her Samaritan fingerprints all over it... which teaches a lesson all on its own. And *then* he offers her a *blessing*, straight from God, that would do *more* than quench the thirst of her body for a moment, but quench her *spiritual* thirst forever.

There's more to the story that I didn't include in our Scripture reading for today, because it has a lot of details and touches on a number of different topics and themes that we don't have time to explore in just one Sunday morning.

But we've already heard the beginning and I'll tell you how it ends. The woman at the well comes to believe in the living water Jesus offers her, she returns to her city and gathers up as many Samaritans as she can and brings them *back* to the well, and Jesus invites them to stay with him for two days as he teaches and ministers to every last one.

Now when Jesus does something, he never does just *one* thing. When we read in the Bible an account of Jesus *doing* something, we should always be listening both for what that says Jesus can do for *us*, and for what it says we are supposed to do for *others*. **The Jewish Jesus offering living water to the Samaritan woman at the well tells us that when we are thirsty for things that don't satisfy, Jesus has something to offer us that will quench the thirst of our hearts. And it *also* tells us that as *followers* of Jesus we**

should follow his *example* and strive to quench the thirst of *others*, no matter *what* artificial barriers exist between us and them.

What truly matters here is thirst, and the water to quench it.

The Samaritan woman had water she drew from the well, and Jesus' body had the thirst of a long day's hike.

Jesus had the living water of God's loving Spirit, and this woman had a *spiritual* thirst... a thirst that the world could not quench.

That thirst should be familiar to all of you, because despite any of the differences that separate us, we all have a common origin: we're all human. We all know what it is to be thirsty, hungry, cold, exhausted. And we have needs that run even *deeper* than food, water, shelter, security, even air. Spiritual needs, needs of the *soul* that, when they go unmet, they leave our food without flavor, our sleep without *rest*, and our *house* without home.

In this day and age it should be clear to all of us that church is failing to prove its relevance to the people of this world. Faith and religion have been slipping lower and lower on people's priority lists, and more and more, people have come to feel that Christianity doesn't *serve* any of the needs they *have*. And I don't actually believe that's a failing on *their* part... and I don't think the answer is as simple as saying... we must not play the right kind of music, or we don't have enough money, or people don't realize just how friendly we are. It's deeper than that. I also don't believe it's a *sign* that the people of the world no longer *have* spiritual needs.

It's a sign of how easy it is for followers of Christ to lose *track* of the spiritual needs of the people of their communities and the world. It's a sign of how easy it is—through good intentions or bad, through action or inaction or lack of understanding—how easy it is for us to withhold God's living water, the water that quenches those *deepest* of thirsts... that water that *God* offers *freely*.

We lose sight of what people's needs actually are—the physical, tangible ones *and* the spiritual ones. And we don't *realize* it because *our* spiritual needs are being *met*. Right? That's why you're here today. Because this church has figured out how to help God meet *your* needs.

But there isn't really one universal triangle-shaped hierarchy for the needs of the *spirit*.

The needs of *your* spirit and the needs of the person in the next *pew*... have their differences.

And *our* needs are different than the needs of many of our *neighbors*. If they weren't, then they'd all be in *here*, wouldn't they?

But faith in *Christ*... means that we believe Christ can *meet* all those different needs. That there's something God has to offer *everyone*—no matter who they are—that'll quench their thirst. It's the *only* reason buildings like this exist... and when we lose sight of that, we're just throwing money at a pointless heating bill every year.

Matthew 25 says the people will ask: "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or *thirsty* or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison and did *not* take care of you?' Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did *not* do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.'" That verse is about failing Christ.

And just as we fail Christ when we fail to care for those in need... we fail Christ when we fail to *recognize* the spiritual needs of our neighbors—God's beloved children *all*. **So we as a church, we as followers of Jesus, need to keep asking the questions and seeking the answers: what needs of the spirit are not being met? What is it that our neighbors need that the world is not giving them? And how can we be the source of living water for *them*?** May God help us to hear the answers.