

Colossians 3:1-15
“Reflections of the Chosen”

July 15, 2018
Rev. David Pierce

It’s good to be back together again this morning. We have been places this week. You may not realize it, but as a church, in the last 7 days, you and I have been up and back to Lewiston, Maine. Specifically, I, along with Laurie Ezovski and 4 middle school students—Annie Henderson, Olivia Perry, Brandon Ezovski, and Mason Bard—have been up and back to Maine, but believe me when I tell you, you also were there with us. That we could not have gotten to Maine without you, nor would there have been much point in us going if not for you. For what I’m about to tell you is all true. That last Sunday as Annie, Olivia, Brandon, Mason, Laurie, and I stood before you here in worship and you told us, “You will meet new neighbors who will need help carrying their hopes and troubles, and you will come across new ideas that will both inspire and frighten you, but when you are afraid, may you feel the courage of our prayers all around you,” we believed your words were true. And when we told you in turn that we thank God for the gift of our church, for your love and encouragement in all things, our word to you was true.

That after the service was over someone came up to me and handed me an envelope with a note attached. The note read:

Dear David: As you venture to Lewiston, Maine and the Root Cellar this week with Annie, Olivia, Brandon, Mason, and Laurie, may the journey be filled with opportunities to share faith and help others. There will be moments of joy and wonder as well as hardship and struggle. We are grateful for your ministry. The enclosed was gathered for you to use where you see a need in the week ahead. While we cannot all attend this mission trip, this is a way for us to contribute to the witness and outreach of Four Corners Community Chapel in Lewiston.

Enclosed was over \$1,000. I don’t know who it all came from. What I know is that this is true: I told our team to keep their eyes open. I told them that within our pockets was \$1,000 to share, and that means coming up with at least a thousand ways to cover the needs of the world.

So, we got on route 95 and headed north to greet the world. I would guess that all of us have probably driven north on 95 in New England during the summertime at one time or another. It’s like the whole world has decided to go camping at once. Every third vehicle

is a truck pulling a camper or a car carrying bikes or kayaks, and some are carrying both. People don't actually seem to mind the back-up at the tollbooths. The trees are all green, the air smells clean and crisp, in 3 short hours we'll be in Maine, where every license plate reads, "The way life should be." In one respect, to get off exit 60 in Lewiston is to see that life is, surely, the way it should be, for Lewiston is not like other cities in Maine, or even in New England.

On several occasions last week I was asked by people, "What made you decide to bring a group to Lewiston?" My answer was always that I wasn't looking to come to Lewiston. I was looking to travel with a group of young people to a place where refugees lived. To spend a week rubbing shoulders with people whose life experiences are not our own. To hear their stories of longing and hope, and to see if we might learn something about how to be better neighbors, if not a better country and world. That Lewiston was a place where all this was happening was as much a surprise to me as to anyone. Then again, I think it just goes to show that the greatest surprises can often be found right where we are.

Those of us who know anything about Lewiston might know that it's home to Bates College, a private liberal arts college that is nationally ranked. We might know that Lewiston is the second largest city in Maine and that it's often called not Lewiston, but Lewiston-Auburn, so named for the way the two communities have been historically connected to one another—growing in similar ways and to similar sizes. We might know that, like many towns and cities in Maine, Lewiston has a large French speaking population—25%--and that for this reason, as well as for its low crime rate and cost of living, in the past 13 years Lewiston has become home to over 5,000 refugees from Somalia, Angola, the Congo, and other parts of Africa.

By definition, refugees are people who flee their country for fear of their lives. They leave not because they are following the American Dream, but because they are running from war and death. In some cases, refugees may move to a refugee camp where they might stay only temporarily—2, 3, 10, sometimes up to 20 years—waiting and hoping for the day they can go home again. In some cases, however, people leave their country knowing already that they'll never be able to go back. In such cases, you are not called a

refugee. You are called an asylum seeker, because you are looking not just for refuge, but for a new home.

All this is true. It is also true that the decision to open the door to refugees is rarely an easy one to make. Because welcoming one another means that our home and country is no longer ours alone. As I overheard one resident of Lewiston describe it to me, “This is Maine the way life should be.” On the other hand, the decision to welcome refugees has also earned Lewiston the nickname “Dirty Lew.” It has caused some of its own residents to leave their home in Lewiston and move across the river to Auburn. And isn’t that ironic? It has led to deliberate and unfortunate changes in the way the two cities share resources. Bus routes that once ran from Lewiston to Wal-Mart in Auburn in 10 minutes now take several hours. Take exit 60 into Lewiston today and within a matter of miles, the scene goes from well-manicured yards with pine trees and 1 acre lots to 4-story apartments buildings with trash all over the yard. Because in Lewiston there are no trash cans on public streets.

It’s true that being a community for refugees is hard, because we live in a world that is intent on making us decide who is and is not deserving—deserving of love, deserving of mercy, deserving of help... Based on who has worked the hardest or suffered the longest or who has the most to offer us in return. “Loving refugees is hard. It’s true,” Annie told me on Friday as we were packing up to come home. “How can it not be? Refugees always come from hard places. Their lives have been hard. Their stories are hard, and some parts are even scary. And they are trying to do a really hard thing by knocking on someone else’s door and asking to be let in. They’re hard to love.” And then she said this. “But when something is hard to love, doesn’t that just mean it probably needs to be loved that much more?”

So, let me close with a couple short stories about how much you loved in Lewiston last week. On Wednesday morning, we took a walking tour of Lisbon Street, which is home to many shops and bakeries that are owned by Somalians. It was quite the site. Our group totaled only 6 people, but we spent the week with another youth group, a remarkable group, from Yarmouth, Maine, and their group had 15 in it. About 22 of us walking down Lisbon Street, half of us stopped in at a storefront and introduced ourselves to the man behind the counter, a man named Abdul. Abdul told us that he was originally from

Mogadishu and that he fled in the late 90s at the height of civil war. In Somalia he was a well-respected lawyer, but here in the U.S. his credentials do not carry and now in his 60s, he does not think about going back to school. He owns this little restaurant where he sells sambusa, a Somalian staple of fried dough stuffed with ground beef, onions, and maybe corn or carrots. His wife also makes homemade bread pastries. We notice that he has about 15 sambusas and 8 pastries. I don't know if this is all he has for the day or if he can make more, but I ask him, "How much for all this?"

"All this?" he says with a smirk.

"Yes, how much for all of it?"

"\$27 dollars."

I pull out my envelope. We eat everything Abdul gives us and before leaving we order another 10 sambusas and 5 pastries for the road.

Our host for the week was an organization called the Root Cellar and every afternoon from 12:30 – 4 p.m. they hosted all the children in the neighborhood for what they call *Super Summer*. As guests of the *Root Cellar* for the week, our job was simply to be extra hands to help out with games, skits, science experiments, and to go on field trips. The theme for the week was superheroes—the Avengers versus Justice League! Now when I say all the neighborhood children came to *Super Summer*, I do mean nearly all. And they didn't come with their parents to drop them off. They came on their own. Kids ages 5 through 11. Many of them showed up each day not having eaten yet. Others might not have slept well the night before. They wore the same clothes most days, and they were not—how shall I put this—mild mannered. But of course they weren't. After all, they had come from hard places and had lived hard lives. Their parents had been, or were, detained or incarcerated. They knew cousins and siblings who had been shot and killed back home. Yet there were not unlike me, full of hopes and dreams.

On one occasion, we were all sitting on the floor together waiting for the next thing to happen. To help pass the time, one of the staff at the *Root Cellar* got up and asked the kids what they dreamed about. "What are your goals?"

One little boy named Dan raised his hand and said, "My goal is to get all the girls."

"Dan, don't say that," I whispered to him.

“Why not?” And then looking up at the staff member who had asked the question, a young woman in her early 20s, Dan said to her, “I’ll start with you.”

That he needs to finesse his pick-up lines and maybe work on his humility is true. That he is exactly what Paul and Timothy had in mind when they said, “As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved,” is also true.

“As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, and above all, with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.”

We spent the entire week reflecting each morning and night on these words, asking ourselves, who are God’s chosen ones? And what does it look like to wear the clothing of the chosen? Does it look like a little Muslim girl wearing a hijab? Or a little boy from Africa wearing the same pair of brown corduroys every day because it’s all he has to wear? Or an old man dressed up in his Sunday best? Or does it mean having a cool blue tee-shirt that says *Super Summer* on the front and lists the names of some local sponsors on the back?

If you look on the back of my *Super Summer* shirt today you’ll see that where it has the name of those sponsors, I’ve written over them in black permanent marker the words: compassion, kindness, meekness, and patience. Because I think this is what Paul and Timothy had in mind: wearing the clothing of the chosen means being able to take your clothing off at any time, and giving it to the world to put on, so that those who have never known compassion or kindness or love might be fully covered in it. Amen.