

For it is by

**G R A C E**

you have been saved, through faith-  
& this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God.

March 8, 2020

## We Gather for Worship

Prelude & Entrance of Christ's Light  
Gratitude Moments

### \*Call to Worship

L: Like Nicodemus, we come here today seeking answers from Jesus.

P: We want to grow in faith as we follow him.

L: We might sometimes have questions or doubts but we continue to listen for and learn from Jesus' teachings.

P: As we worship today, may we engage all our senses so that we might see Jesus and claim his message for us.

\*Hymn "Because He Lives"

UMH #364

Children's Moment

Ministry of Music

Prayer (unison)

Holy God, Nicodemus approached Jesus in the dark of night, afraid of being seen, but wanting to know more about your grace. We, too, want to try to understand that grace and to accept it without question; yet, sometimes it is too amazing to comprehend. Clear our minds and hearts so that we can continue to grow in grace and learn more about Jesus' saving love, and moving forward as his followers. Help us to keep sharing the message of your love with others to the best of our ability. Amen.

Sung Response "Lead Me, Lord"

UMH #473

## We Proclaim the Word

Reading the Word John 3:1-17

L: The Word of God for the People of God.

P: Thanks be to God.

Message "Nicodemus"

Rev. Dr. Deb Hanson

\*Hymn "Like a Child"

TFWS #2092

## We Respond to God's Word

Prayers of the People

Silent Prayer and Pastoral Prayer

The Lord's Prayer (unison)

Our Father, who are in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.

Giving of Our Tithes and Offerings

\*Doxology (Please join in singing the following)

UMH #87

This gift we now bring, this present, this token, these words can convey it, the joy of this day! When grateful we come, remembering rejoicing, this song we now offer in honor and praise.

\*Prayer of Dedication (unison)

Generous God, we give you these gifts from our abundance and ask your blessing on our offerings. May they become bread for the hungry, hope for the hopeless, and grace for those who are lost. Amen.

## We Go Forth to Serve

\*Hymn "To God be the Glory"

UMH #98

\*Choral Benediction (Congregation encircles the Sanctuary)

May the Lord, gracious God bless and keep you forever. Grant you peace, perfect peace, courage in every endeavor. Lift up your eyes and seek his face and his grace forever. May the Lord, mighty God bless and keep you forever.

\*Pastor's Charge

Postlude

*\*Please stand as you are comfortable*

*TFWS = The Faith We Sing UMH = United Methodist Hymnal*

*Large print bulletins are available from the greeters*



## UPCOMING EVENTS

3/8 - Daylight savings begins. It is time to spring forward.

3/10 - Peace Circle meeting, 9:30 a.m. at either Yvonne's or Darlene's.

3/17 - Church Council, 6:00 pm at the church. All are welcome.

3/22 - Open Spirit Task Force meeting from 2-4 pm at St. John's in Dover, NH. This is an open meeting about the upcoming General Conference.



## THINGS TO KNOW

Altar Flowers - Are in honor of the Peace Circle.

Kids First - Last month, Kids First was introduced. Increased emergency placements and the willingness of FUMC to meet this challenge head on represents the support in making a difference in our community.

This month, the need is for new, neutral color twin bed sheet sets and/or new twin blankets. Please drop off donations in the basket in the office. A complete list of needed items includes:

Deodorant	Dry Shampoo	Toothbrush & Toothpaste
Hairbrush	Hand Towels	Notebook & Pen
Baby Wipes	Chapstick	Small First Aid Kits

For monetary donations, please make check out to FUMC, with Kids First in the memo section. Please direct questions to any church council member.



## PRAYER LIST

Jim Slater

Sue Ellery

Dan Strange

Bobbie Noble

Jean & Graham Alvord Family

Josh, Brenda West's cousin

Julia West

Judy Doyon

Rev. Charles Hartman

Emily - for the Fernandez Family

Our Denomination

Our Church Family

All those living in assisted living, nursing care or homebound

2020 Flower chart - is posted in the Narthex. Bring your own arrangement or have the church order them at a cost of \$25. This is a great way to honor, remember, thank or let someone know they are appreciated.



## WORSHIP TEAM

Pastor - Rev. Dr. Debra J. Hanson

Pastor's Assistant - David Richards – Lay Leader - Susan Sarosiek

Liturgist - Declan Baker – Acolyte - Linda Reiber

Director of Music - Bevan Bloemendaal

Sound Tech - Sue Sarosiek – Worship Service Tech - Steve Scott

Greeters - Shirley Russ & Marilyn Stebbins

Ushers - Ken & Jenya Westbrook

Sunday School - Dave Atkinson

Photographer - Dave Atkinson



## **FUMC PORTSMOUTH A RECONCILING CONGREGATION**

We, the congregation of the First United Methodist Church of Portsmouth, New Hampshire, are dedicated in worshipping, learning, and serving with all people as we embrace Jesus Christ's message of love and acceptance. As a United Methodist Church we stand fully behind the statement "Open Hearts, Open Minds, and Open Doors". We celebrate our diversity and invite all persons regardless of age, gender, racial or ethnic background, sexual orientation, marital or socioeconomic status, nationality, physical or mental ability into full membership and participation in the life of this community of faith.



**New England Annual Conference Tri-State District**  
The Rev. Sudarshana Devadhar, Bishop  
The Rev. Taesung Kang, District Superintendent

**FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH**  
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Pastor office hours - Tuesday and Thursday 9 am - 12 pm  
[call to ensure availability]  
Pastor - Rev. Dr. Debra J. Hanson

Check out our website at [www.fumcportsmouth.com](http://www.fumcportsmouth.com)

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SERMON TRANSCRIPT GIVEN BY  
REV. DR. DEB HANSON

“Nicodemus” – 3/8/2020

First UMC – Rev. Dr. Debra J. Hanson

SCRIPTURE: John 3:1-17

THEME: God’s grace is for everyone.

Dr. David Lose shared this story about a member of his congregation: Tom’s six-year-old son Benjamin protested his bedtime. Frustrated by his father’s refusal to budge, Benjamin finally became so frustrated that he said, “Daddy, I hate you!” Tom, possessing the presence of mind I wish I more frequently displayed, replied, “I’m sorry you feel that way, Ben, but I love you.” To which Benjamin replied, “Don’t say that!” Surprised, Tom continued, “Ben but it’s true—I love you.” “Don’t say that, Daddy.” “But I love you, Ben.” “Stop saying that Daddy! Stop saying it right now!” And then it came: “Benjamin, now listen to me: I love you...like it or not!”

Even at six years old . . . Benjamin realized that in the face of unconditional love he was powerless. If Tom had been willing to negotiate – “I’ll love you *if* you go to bed nicely” – then Benjamin would be a player: “Okay, this time, but I’m not eating my vegetables at dinner tomorrow.” But once Tom refused to negotiate, refused to make his love for his son conditional on something Benjamin did, then Ben couldn’t do anything but accept or flee that love. (*Found at Text This Week under “Dear Working Preacher” by David Lose for today’s gospel lesson commentaries.*)

God’s love for us is like that: offered freely, without us having to do anything to earn it. Nicodemus didn’t understand that. As a Pharisee, he was used to having laws and traditions to follow, and he would have – as a faithful Pharisee – believed that the way to the kingdom of God was through his Temple work and faithful living of the Torah. When he heard Jesus say that he must be born again or more accurately translated: “born from above,” meaning born in the Spirit, he was confused. I suspect we would feel the same way and wonder what that meant. Human beings are finite creatures with limited comprehension of the vastness of God’s vision for this world. Nicodemus knew that he had been born into his biological family, and he had also been born into the traditions of the Pharisees, learning their traditions and the law. He knew what it meant to live according to Jewish tradition.

Yet, his heart must have led him to believe that something was missing for he went looking for Jesus and had questions to ask. We don’t know if he went to look for Jesus at night because he was afraid to be seen or he didn’t want to attract a crowd. We aren’t sure if he was sent to Jesus to test him, which is a possibility because he uses the word “we” when asking his questions. What we do know is that Nicodemus approached Jesus when it was dark, and often that is symbolic in the scriptures of someone who didn’t understand something. We even use the term today when we say, “I don’t know. I’m in the dark about this.”

Nicodemus was looking for something, though. He didn’t understand Jesus’ image of being born from above. However, he would have understood the image of the bronze serpent that Jesus used in his answer. When the Israelites were roaming in the wilderness after being released from slavery in Egypt, they tended to complain about everything: not having food, then the kind of food they had to eat, not having enough water, and so forth. At one point in their journey, poisonous snakes appeared, and they turned again to God for rescue, so God told Moses to make a bronze snake and raise it up on a pole for all to see so that anyone who had been bitten could look at the snake and then would live. However, as time went on, the Hebrew nation settled in Israel, and eventually, the bronze snake became an icon or symbol which the people started worshiping instead of God. Later Hezekiah broke the serpent into pieces as a way of ridding the worship of God from false images.

Being born anew for Nicodemus, then, included taking on new ways of doing things, receiving new ideas, learning more about how God’s love was shared, and allowing the Holy Spirit to guide the religious leaders toward a deeper connection with God and with the people. It wasn’t only about ritual and following the rules, but it was about expanding the experience of God and living in God’s way of doing things. Nicodemus didn’t comprehend that idea. It’s hard to move out of the way we

have always done things into more expanded ways. Jesus wasn't saying that the current ways were wrong, only that they were too narrow.

Sometimes we get stuck in a rut and just keep doing the same thing over and over again even though it really doesn't work. Writer Portia Nelson describes this in her poem called "Autobiography in Five Short Chapters":

CHAPTER 1: I walk down the street.

There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.

I fall in.

I am lost . . . I am helpless.

It isn't my fault.

It takes forever to find a way out.

CHAPTER 2: I walk down the same street.

There is a deep hole in the sidewalk

I pretend I don't see it.

I fall in again.

I can't believe I am in this same place.

But it isn't my fault.

It still takes a long time to get out.

CHAPTER 3: I walk down the same street.

There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.

I see it is there.

I still fall in . . . it's a habit . . . but,

my eyes are open.

I know where I am.

It is *my* fault.

I get out immediately.

CHAPTER 4: I walk down the same street.

There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.

I walk around it.

CHAPTER 5: I walk down another street.

*(from There's a Hole in my Sidewalk by Portia Nelson, Beyond Words Publishing, Inc, Los Angeles, 1993)*

Nicodemus was looking for answers to something that he had been seeking, and it meant that he needed to look at his relationship with God in a different way, expand his understanding of God's interactions with humanity. Jesus continually brought him back to God, turned his attention to the power of the Spirit.

The experience of God can be meaningful through traditions and rituals, of course, AND it can be painful to go through the regular experience of being rebirthed into a new spiritual place. A few years ago when I was visiting my family in Iowa, one of the women who sings in the choir at my Dad's church was talking to me about moving to new spiritual places. She worried that she had times when she doubted, and before I could say anything, she added that she had finally figured out that doubt helped her to become stronger in her faith and working through doubt, as scary as it was for her, always brought her to a new place in her relationship with Jesus.

What does that for us? The message of this passage from beginning to end is about God's love for us - for the world - for everyone. Does anyone remember a guy who showed up regularly at golf tournaments and other sporting events wearing a rainbow wig and holding a sign that read John 3:16? His intentions were good, but even though his message may have made a few people curious, mostly likely it didn't really get through because there is so much more in that short verse. John 3:16, as Martin Luther said, ". . . contains the gospel in a nutshell." (*from the David Lose commentary mentioned above.*) "God so loved the world!" And Jesus' life, death, and resurrection brought that love to us through forgiveness and acceptance.

God's love is for everyone. God's love breaks through the darkness of our souls and loves us in spite of ourselves. God's love is unconditional, accepting us, encouraging us, sitting with us when we hurt and doubt, drawing us out of ourselves, building relationships with us through the Spirit as well as through those who surround us with love and care.

Six years ago, when my mom died, my family experienced this through so many people and in so many ways. As soon as the word was out about Mom's death, one couple showed up at Dad's house with an entire meal. Others came over the course of the week with breakfast rolls, finger foods, and words of love and support. Over one hundred people came to calling hours, including 15 of my 23 cousins on my mom's side of the family. People sent donations to the church in Mom's memory as well as to Fellowship Village, the nursing facility where she had been for the last three and a half months of her life and others donated to the new town swimming pool - totally over \$1,000.

Dad must have received over 100 cards, and all four of us children received a lot of cards - I counted over 50 from friends, colleagues, and these two churches just for Dave and me. In addition, words, emails, Facebook posts, and other expressions of love and support helped us to know that God's love surrounded us with people who cared and who prayed for us and were there for us.

I'm sure many of you have experienced similar ways in which others have supported and shown their care for you and your loved ones, and we have seen it in other situations, such as the support for those who lost family members, homes, everything in Nashville this week after a tornado ripped through that area. We often see so much negative news reporting that we forget that many, many people really do care and offer to help when others are hurting. God's love, offered unconditionally and freely, continues toward completion in this world because we reach out to share it with each other.

We are offered the abundance of God's grace, and we receive Jesus, the word-made-flesh through our worship and the sacraments, as well as through the sacred moments of sharing God's love with others. It can be disconcerting - this amazing and tremendous love that we are given. We don't have to negotiate or earn it or influence God to give it to us - it's just ours because God loves us. Like Benjamin in the story at the beginning of this sermon, we eventually figure out that the love is there regardless, and that is what helps us to love God back and to love others.

John 3:16 is actually only the beginning of the Gospel message. It begins with the love of God that is so great, God's Son died for our sins, but it doesn't stop there. That love was so strong, that God raised Jesus from the dead and overcame sin and death, reconciling us to God and each other and calling us to live as forgiven, beloved, and empowered children of God in this world.

Micah 6:8 reads: "God has told you, O human, what is good; and what does God require of you but to do justice, love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (*paraphrased*) Healing takes place when we begin to live out God's words in the power of the Holy Spirit, when we can accept the



Micah 6:8 reads: “God has told you, O human, what is good; and what does God require of you but to do justice, love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (*paraphrased*) Healing takes place when we begin to live out God’s words in the power of the Holy Spirit, when we can accept the changes that happen for the good of ourselves and others, and to move more deeply into our relationship with God and others. God so loves the world - in other words: God loves the world *in this way*: through us.

One commentator wrote: *Jesus offered people the chance to become family - not the fraught, dysfunctional version of family that many of us are familiar with, but family that loves as God loves, family in which each person gives of herself or himself with abandon and never loses out, because each other member is giving in the same way - without . . . further bloodshed.* (Sarah Dylan Breuer, found at *Text This Week* under the commentary section of today’s gospel lesson.)

In our baptism, we were born of water and the Spirit, and in our lives, we live out that blessing and offer God’s grace and love to others through our actions. May Nicodemus remind us that God’s love is unconditional - God loves us no matter just because we are God’s children. May Nicodemus remind us of the longing in our own hearts to keep God’s love close as well as to share it because as we share it, the world will be transformed. Every day is a new opportunity to grow - to rebirth into a new place with God - to be part of acting on that amazing grace of God that is our free gift - no matter what.

Let us pray: “Birthing God, you gave us new life when we were born of water and Spirit. Help us live into that new life, refreshed and renewed and ready to carry on your work in the world. Amen. (*David Lose - see previous citations - with a little addition of my own.*)