



“Love”

Scripture: John 15:9-17, 1 John 5:1-6

Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church

May 6, 2018

The Rev. Dr. Richard Coble

Associate Pastor

David Small grew up in a house of silence. “Mama had her little cough,” he says, “Once or twice, some quiet sobbing, out of sight. Or the slamming of kitchen cupboard doors. That was her language. The mere moving of her fork a half-inch to the right spelled dread at the dinner table. Her furious, silent withdrawals could last for days, even weeks at a time. Because she never spoke her mind, we never knew what this was.”¹ His father had a punching bag downstairs. His language was hitting it, every night. Bam bam bam. For David’s older brother, it was the drums. More hitting. Pop pop pop. David’s own language, in this silent house, this house of secrets, was getting sick. And sick. And sick, throughout his childhood. David Small’s memoir is a book about the things we leave unsaid. Family secrets and family shame. The ways we stop paying attention to one another, or stop loving one another, or become consumed by disdain for one another, the ways we hold on to old hurts, unhealed wounds.

At 11, David developed cancer of the thyroid. You see, David’s father was a radiologist of the 1940s, and, back then, early childhood breathing illness were treated with high intensity x-rays, over and over, over and over. The father trying to fix David, heal his sick son, his sick son born in a house where there always seemed to be something wrong. The father tried to fix him so much that he exposed David to cancer-inducing radiation. A lump developed in David’s 11-year-old throat. And by that time, sickness had been such a part of David, such a part of his language that his family ignored him, started to treat him like a problem that wouldn’t go away. “Doctors cost money and money is something that is in short supply in this house,” David’s mother said,

¹ David Small, *Stitches: A Memior* (New York: WW Norton, 2010).

or rather, she shouted. So, it took three and a half years before he saw a specialist, before he was diagnosed with cancer. It was another six months after the cancer was removed before he even discovered what it was. His family hid his diagnosis from him.

Imperfect love. No matter who we are, we love with imperfect love, with human love, and human love disappoints; we are bound to disappoint ourselves. How else can you explain the world that we find ourselves in? Even when you get past the editorial soundbites, and campaign slogans, the vindictive tweets, and late-night monologues, the faux-righteous indignation, these things that have been our bread and butter for a year and for years now; even beyond that world, where love really seems absent, beyond it is the world in which we live every day, the world of imperfect people like you and me. With relatives we don't talk to anymore. People we never really forgive. People we walk over or we ignore as we pass by. The world in our day to day, our collective experience, is one of imperfect love.

And yet, our faith conquers the world says the author of 1 John: "For whatever is born of God conquers the world. And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith." But you look around, and the world seems to be doing alright, and we, well, sometimes it feels like we're not doing alright. Are you doing alright? Has your love conquered the world?

The climax of David Small's memoir is heartbreaking, so just prepare yourselves. It's simply him letting go of his family. Years spent in an unloving house lead to years of delinquency, running away. He finally found a counselor, or, was forced by a court to see a counselor, who told him an obvious truth. In the memoir, it's actually kind of funny. The book is a graphic novel, by the way; its told like a comic book, like a really sad, tragic comic book, so it tells its story in pictures. And this counselor, in the book, David Small draws him as a white rabbit. You can't help but think of Alice in Wonderland. "Follow the white rabbit. He will take

you to a place you have never been before.” So this counselor, who is also a white rabbit, he tells David: “You’ve been living in a world full of nonsense, David,” the counselor tells him. “No one has been telling you the truth about anything. But I’m going to tell you the truth. Are you ready?” There’s a pause. The counselor looks up: “Your mother doesn’t love you.” You know, maybe this counselor is being too hard. That is a hard truth to hear. I don’t know what it would be like to hear those words and to hear them as truth, but then again I didn’t grow up in David’s house, and he heard them as truth. And he cried and he cried and he cried. And then he started to pull himself back together again.

I’m telling this story in long form, because I think it’s necessary, if we are going to talk about love, to be honest about how hard it is to love, in the day to day, in the silent places, in the shameful places. If we’re going to talk about love in this place, let’s be honest about how hard it is to love when you are honest about your pain, or how hard it is to love when you come from a loveless place, and God knows, there are so many places that seem at a loss of love these days. “Beloved, let us love one another,” says 1 John, and he writes it like that’s an easy thing.

The benefit of a memoir is you get the long story, the whole story, the story that isn’t always or often available in our day to day existence, the story that wasn’t available to David Small in his childhood, day to day, in his silent household. Young David couldn’t have known that his mother was a closeted lesbian woman, forced by her culture and her relatives and probably her church into a life she didn’t want to live, into a family that never felt right. David didn’t find out his mother’s secret until he was a teenager, walking in on his mother and Mrs. Dillon. “I just happened to be the one who stumbled into the room at the wrong moment,” he says, “A moment [my mother] must have known was coming her whole life.” He also couldn’t have known that she had lived a life of debilitating pain, born with heart and lung defects that

drained her all her short life. Or that she also had grown up in a house of secrets and shame. The benefit of memoir is you see that often people have their reasons, that everyone has their wounds; you see how wounded people wound others.

And so if we love, we love with imperfect love, with human love, because unlike a memoir, our day to day lives are lived through times and stories and contexts and power arrangements and policies that are beyond our grasp, usually out of our knowledge. And 1 John says, that we are to love the children of God. “Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the parent loves the child.” And yet we can only love with human love, imperfect love.

We bring it here. We bring our humanity here, week to week. People have been bringing their human love here Sunday after Sunday for sixty-five years. To session meetings, and deacon meetings, and finance meetings, and property meetings, and all the other meetings, to Bible Studies, and Sunday school classes, to service projects, to Presbyterian Women, to pastoral care appointments and weddings and funerals, to youth group and children’s ministry. We have gathered, and our parents have gathered. And our grandparents have gathered. And new faces have gathered here, week after week for sixty-five years, bringing our humanity, our imperfect love, our faith.

And we’ve brought our wounds here together, seeking wholeness, and redemption, and healing, trying to love one another. We have learned and are learning how to bring our full selves through the doors, learning how to know one another beyond just the superficial, to know each other, to be in one another’s lives, and in our stories and in our pain. Sixty-five years of cultivating compassion. Sixty-five years of learning how to tell the truth about ourselves. Sixty-

five years of coming out of our secrets, and our shame, and our silences. Sixty-five years of learning how to love.

Because we look to a man who sat down with his disciples after washing their feet and he said to them, right before his betrayal, “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you...I am giving these commands so that you may love one another.” Imperfect, loving people, brought together by God, asked to love one another, empowered to love one another by the example and the Spirit and the Grace of God in Jesus Christ. We come together because we have tasted perfect, and unending love and grace, and we want so desperately to follow it, and to show it to others.

I grew up with David Small, not really, but I grew up with his children’s books. *Imogene’s Antlers* is a book about a young girl who wakes up with a 12-point rack of reindeer antlers sprouting from her head.² It was my favorite. By the end of the book, Imogene befriends the birds who make nests in her antlers. What a beautiful image of a misunderstood child making the most out of the strange unpredictabilities of life! David, an abused child who grew up in a home where love was absent, is now a children’s book author. What a beautiful image of someone fashioning instruments of healing out of his pain.

And so do we fashion healing out of pain, Grace Covenant, imperfect, loving people, brought together by God, asked to love one another, empowered to love one another by the example and the Spirit and the Grace of God in Jesus Christ, doing so now for 65 years. We have been brought together here by God, asked to love one another, because God first loved us. And so we have, and so we will. Because we believe that love conquers the world. Because we

² David Small, *Imogene’s Antlers* (New York: Dragonfly, 1985).

believe in resurrection; we believe that you can live in love and find love, no matter who you are or where you come from. Thank God for Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church.