It has been said that Pastors really only have 1 sermon with multiple illustrations. I mostly agree, I perhaps have 3. Several years ago there was a Facebook post going around that asked people to say what they hear most from their pastor. I had some brave folks from here answer, “that God loves us and that there is nothing we can say or do to change God’s love for us.” I’ve been thinking a great deal about love throughout this new year. I know that we all wanted 2021 to be different than we experienced 2020 to be but all the problems we had then are still with us now. So, what is God calling us to do in these hard times, love. Love God and love each other. But what is love? The Apostle Paul wrote the seminal piece on love. Some of us have heard the passage from 1st Corinthians at more weddings than we could count. Others of us have the passage framed somewhere in our homes. Still others of us have it memorized. Between now and the beginning of Lent we will look at what Paul wrote about love to the Corinthians. We will learn to do what God has asked us to do better by studying 4 verses, a little at a time.

A little context about the letter and passage before we look at the specifics of what Paul teaches about love. First, an Epistle is another name for letter. Paul is writing a letter to the people who made up the church in Corinth, which he founded. After moving on to the next missionary outpost, he received a letter asking for help & guidance because things were not going as they expected. We do not have the original letter sent to Paul from the church, so we have to reverse engineer to know what was going on. The short story – the church was divided and it was not going well. It was comprised of very different groups of people, different ethnicities, gender, age, classes, status, married, widowed, single, adults & children just to name a few. I think we might identify with the confusion, frustration and sheer questions on how to get along when it appears there is more that divides than unites. I wonder how Paul must’ve felt when he received the letter. Paul, the self-proclaimed chief sinner, had faith that the Gospel of Jesus could bring about change in any situation, so the news may have hurt deeply.

No matter the pain that Paul felt at the news of a flailing church, Paul uses this as an opportunity to teach about what it means to be children of God. Before Paul gets to this passage on love, he talks about who we use the diversity to make the church stronger, using the analogy of a body. Paul is reminding them that the answer cannot be that they separate and create multiple churches in Corinth. In fact, Paul teaches it is the very diversity that is present that will make the church, the body of Christ, vital and alive. For Paul the many gifts that are brought to the community by each member is vital for the success of God’s mission in the world. But how does it happen? Love.

Now, lest we think Paul was giving an easy answer, he knew as we know, that love is hard but it can also have extraordinary power to create, sustain and build unity. Paul also knew, that the pursuit of love is not just about us but about God’s mission in the world. We throw the word love around, we love chocolate, we love baseball, we love tv shows or any number of things but love is so much more than we have a tendency to reduce it to. Paul teaches that what love is, what it is not and finishes with how love is transformational. Today we look at the first description Paul gives, what love is patient and kind.

On the surface it seems obvious that love is patient and kind. And yet, I know that there are more times than I can count when I have not treated people that I love with patience and kindness. In fact, I’m afraid that at times because I feel safe with people I love, I do not always offer patience when we both need it. And as we lose patience with each other, do we also lose patience with God? Perhaps our fast-paced, non-stop world has made us forget that the first description of love is patience and that requires us to slow down. Patience calls us to breathe. Patience calls us to listen. Patience calls us to be flexible. About a year ago, a fitness app I have suggested that every day for a week, when I was stressed to stop and take 3 deep breaths. Every night when I went to log my steps, it asked me, did you respond to stress by taking 3 deep breaths. Long after my challenge to do this ended, I’ve kept the practice. When someone in my sphere yells or refuses to do what is asked, I try to stop, take 3 slow, deep breaths before I ever respond. Sometimes, it takes me 6 or 9 breaths before I open my eyes and respond. In taking these breaths, I remember not just who I am (mom, wife, friend, daughter, pastor, child of God) and whose I am, but I am reminded that unless this is a life and death moment, my response can wait until I may respond in love.

Love is not just patient, it is also kind. A quick google search for kindness quotes yielded a great number of quotable quotes. The first one to catch my eye was that kindness costs nothing but means everything. Have you experienced the kindness of a stranger? Perhaps at the grocery store when you have 5 items and those in front of you have 2 carts full? Kindness feels good, studies have shown that kindness releases serotonin in the brain, which is responsible for feelings of satisfaction and well-being. It is sometimes easy to be kind. But what happens when someone cuts you off while driving or gets the last of the sale item at the store. What about when someone advocates for something that you diametrically oppose? Kindness can be hard. It is easier to be kind when we are not hurried or angry. But when we are not at our best or hurting in some way, patience and kindness go away.

Being centered in love, requires us to be working for good. Being centered in love, which is patient and kind, requires us to see the end result, not as a competition but a collaboration. We don’t ultimately know exactly what happened at the church in Corinth. Did some folks leave and join another church? Did one group take control? The ancient city existed until 1858 when it was totally destroyed by an earthquake. The remains of churches are still there testifying to the church surviving, even if changed from what it was. It is important to note that being patient and kind does not mean being a doormat for people to take advantage of, not does it mean that we never address injustice and oppression. It does mean that how we act towards others matter.

As we continue to grow in the knowledge and love of God, may be know that while there is nothing we can say or do that will keep God from loving us, that we are called to continue to grow in our expression of love for God and our neighbor. May our love be experienced by others as patient and kind. In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.