I don’t keep a list, but I am pretty sure that the word love may be the most abused and misused word in the English language, even though the word “literally” has been making a strong play for that title in recent years. As when Dr. Fauci told us that he “literally got chills.” I guess he somehow felt that he needed to contrast his type of chills with the figurative variety. But when Danny Zuko told us that his chills where multiplying, he did not feel compelled to inform us that they were literal -- they may have been electrifying but not literal. And just to be clear, I am not picking on Dr. Fauci, it is just when I put the words, “I literally” into Google, Fauci’s quote was literally the first example of bad usage that came up. Anyway, back to my point. I say that the word love is terribly misused partly because of the breadth of its usage. We use it to describe both how we feel about our children and how we feel about peach cobbler – that’s a lot of range for one word. Perhaps this is because, unlike the Greeks who had four unique words to describe love, we, in the English language, have only have one. Meaning that a single word has to do a whole lot of work. But there is another reason for this abuse of the word and that has to do with the fact that we don’t take a lot of time to think deeply about things these days. Largely because we are worried that if we do it might get in the way of our binge watching of season four of *Cobra Kai*. But by both being so loose in our definition and by not truly understanding what love is we can miss a lot. So, let’s take a moment and think a little deeper about what love is and see what we might be missing. And to do that let’s take a look at what we hear from St. Paul today in his first letter to the Corinthians.

The opening paragraph sets up the importance of love by saying among other things that “if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.” But St. Paul is not John Lennon and so is not simply satisfied by telling us that all we need is love. Rather, in the following paragraph, he lays out some of the parameters of what love is and what it is not. Now just to show that I went to seminary let’s have a little Greek. I mentioned the Greeks had four different words for love, and so I should probably let you know which Greek word Paul is using in Corinthians, because after all Paul was writing in Greek. He uses the word agape (which looks like English word agape which literally means to have your mouth wide open). Agape is often translated into English as the word charity. But this is charity not in the World Wildlife Fund or Salvation Army sense of the word but rather in the sense of a benevolent goodwill toward humanity. C.S. Lewis in his book *The Four Loves* calls this form of love the highest form because it goes beyond ourselves, it is the type of love that comes from God. If you are curious and to get me to fourteen hundred words the other three loves in the Greek language are *storge*, a kind of fondness, *philia* a type of friendship and *eros* a kind of romantic love. But back to agape and our reading from 1st Corinthians. St. Paul explains love in this way, “Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.” This kind of love is not an easy kind of love. It is not the love of Hallmark Cards and candy hearts but rather a love that comes at a cost.

And I don’t say this just to bring the mood down, I bring it up because there is a danger to a shallow or incomplete view of love and that danger comes in not seeing what love can be. When we say something like we love butter pecan ice cream, what we are really saying is that the ice cream gives us pleasure and happiness. But if we use the word love in a similar way when we say that we love our friend or spouse then we aren’t fully loving them, because our love is conditioned on a particular feeling. And so, what happens when they cease giving us pleasure or happiness? In our disposable society what usually happens is that we move on. But moving on is not part of the definition in what Paul describes. This love is not really compatible with a disposable society. If love bears and endures all things it would seem strange to stop loving when things go south. In fact, those are probably the times where love is most needed. This is the reason why in the wedding vows it is says, “Will you love, comfort, honor and keep him/her, in sickness and in health.” There is an assumption built in that love is something that happens irrespective of the circumstances. Love is not based on whether or not the other person is worthy of it. In fact, it is ultimately based on God and the kind of love he shows to us. For as we read in 1st John, “We love, because he first loved us.”

And I realize that the love I am describing may not sound all that fun. It can sound more like a duty or obligation than it sounds like a 90’s romcom. And perhaps that is true, but there is another side to it. Ask yourself what kind of love you would like to be the recipient of. Do you want to be loved in a conditional way where your every action is judged and tallied to determine if you are still worthy of love or would you prefer the unconditional type where we are loved not because of who we are but despite who we are? Because if we are honest, we all have days where we are not that loveable. And it is probably on those days where we need to be loved all the more.

The kind of love that Paul tells us about today is, in many ways, a very realistic type of love. If we were all perfect all of the time, we might not even have to have such a discussion because love would come naturally. But in the world in which we actually inhabit love takes some effort. We all have flaws; we all have annoying characteristics and we all do things that push people away. God sent his son to die for us not because we deserved it but because we did not deserve it. That is how real love is. For as Jesus tells us, “If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them.” In other words, Jesus is not terribly impressed with the easy type of love.

So, when John Lennon tells us that all we need is love, he is probably on the right track but we still need to know his definition of love. The love we need is a love that does not vanish at the first sight of trouble but rather goes to the difficult and tough places. A love that goes across the divide. Many of the problems in our world are not because we don’t have enough of the easy kind of love but rather because we don’t have enough of the hard kind of love. The love that is there in sickness, the love that bears others burdens, the love that reaches out to people who have different opinions than us. Paul asks us to love in the way in which God loves us so that we may be his, this day and forevermore.