



**The Duty to Love**  
*A sermon preached by Rev. Daniel Smith*  
*At First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC*  
*Sunday, May 21, 2006*

*I love Hoss Manucy!*  
*I love Hoss Manucy!*  
*I love Hoss Manucy, in my heart!"*

Those of you are regulars at our Jazz 5:30 Service will know these lines as the fourth verse of a spiritual we often sing called "I Love Everybody". The rest of you are no doubt asking: Who is Hoss Manucy? What we tell newcomers at jazz is this:

*Halstead "Hoss" Manucy was a violent and merciless Klan leader during the sixties. During civil rights protests in St. Augustine Florida, Klan supporters repeatedly attacked marchers. Dorothy Cotton of the Southern Christian Leadership Council writes, "After we were attacked, we'd come back to the church, and somehow we'd always come back bleeding, singing [the spiritual] "I love everybody..." It was very hard.*



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*Then somebody would always stop because it was hard to sing “I love Hoss Manucy” when he’d just beat us up, to say a little bit about what love really was. We don’t have to like him, but we have to love him. He’s been damaged, too. So we sing it, and the more we sing it, the more we grow in ability to love people who mistreat us so bad.”*

Whenever I sing this particular verse, no matter how distracted or tired or happy or care-free I feel on a given Sunday night, it always makes me stand at attention. It’s like reveille for my soul! I dutifully belt it out, no questions asked. The other verses – *I love everybody, I believe in mercy, I know freedom’s coming* – they’re easy, as most unparticular things are. The fourth verse though, *I love Hoss Manucy*, has never once come easy or naturally. And yet, I sing it with conviction and an albeit reluctant pride. There aren’t many moments in my daily life when I feel like I’m a “no questions asked” Christian. But, each time I sing that song, I know I am touching upon a bedrock principle of Christian discipleship; I know I’m participating, however vicariously, in a love that is more divine than human, more God than me.

Jesus says, “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.” Beneath the layers of human love characterized by the sentimental, the romantic or the erotic, beneath layers that would encase one’s love of family or community members, there lies this kind love that Jesus considers law, a love for everybody, a love for every possible manifestation of human nature no matter how grand or banal or abhorrent.

I know I’m not the first to ask this question but...doesn’t it seem odd that God commands us to love? As you know, it happens in scripture more than once. Doesn’t it seem entirely counter-intuitive to the way we normally think about love in our lives? We often think of a love as a gift, right? Love is something to be freely offered and freely received, something that develops over time. And yet, imagine it, love as an order! Love on-demand! love as some

that is a found in a community of more or less liked minded people like this one? I ask you then: what fulfillment awaits us when the love we share is not merely a choice but a duty? Is it the fulfillment simply of doing the right and righteous thing? More than that, when we love somebody who we would prefer not to love, we can transcend the temporal ways of our human loves. We can find ourselves a share in divine love! Ultimately, we can, through love, participate in eternity. Genuine and Christian love, then, the love that Christ does not ask but command of us is the means by which we can abide in God and Christ and God and Christ can abide in us. As our scripture says, it is the way to make our joy complete! What begins in duty ends in a supreme joy, our joy and that of God.

With God’s help, our hearts and voices can grit out a song of our love for the Hoss Manucy’s of this world. The singing, of course, is just the beginning, just a taste of how we are called and ordered to love everybody that we see. It will make your soul stand at attention! Receive these orders as your duty and as your ultimate concern, and you will let God take command of your very soul. When God so abides in us, we come to realize that it is, in the end, not you or I, but *God* that loves Hoss Manucy in your heart and in mine. It is God that loves the murderer and the rapist and the terrorist and even the leaders of our supposedly free world. It is God who loves them all in and from my heart and yours. No questions asked. It is God then who loves even me that I might someday to learn my love myself, no questions asked. You will love one another as I have loved you. There is no taller order, but also none so fulfilling. Love one another, love everybody, and your joy too will be made whole and complete. Amen.

about when he'll come home, or why she hasn't called yet. There is no sad country song. No achy-break-y hearts here! In his book the "Works of Love", Kierkegaard reminds us that this bedrock Christian love lacks those temporalities which so often lead to desperate feelings, none of those decidedly untimely heartbreaks and deaths that devastate us when they occur to those whom we have chosen to love. But the love that is more than our pleasure and our pain, the love that is more deeply our duty as Christians, has no consideration of our feelings on the matter. In the end, this dutiful love is the only love that can be truly selfless because our preferences and temporal expectations do not apply. To quote Keirkegaard, "Only when love is a duty, only then is love eternally secure... Only when it is a duty to love, only then is love everlastingly free in blessed independence. ... Only when it is a duty to love, only then is love everlastingly secured against despair."

In his eloquent sermon entitled "The Power of Love," the great twentieth century theologian Paul Tillich writes about a Swedish woman who helped orphans and prisoners during the World War I. For her efforts to offer food and healing and comfort, she herself ended up in a concentration camp. Tillich writes, "It is a rare gift to meet a human being in whom love—this means God—is so overwhelmingly manifest. It undercuts theological arrogance as well as pious isolation. It is more than justice and greater than faith or hope. It is the very presence of God in the form of a human being. For God is love. In every moment of genuine love we are dwelling in God and God in us."

So...is this genuine and ultimately selfless love the only kind that Jesus would recommend? Of course not, but he does say, "there is no greater love than this." How many of us live our lives based on the assumption that the path to happiness and fulfillment is through those other layers of love, through the love of family and friends or even through love

calculated obedience to the Creator! Does this make any sense?

One way to consider this kind *agape* Christian love is as a duty. So often when we hear those "thou shalt love" lines, our minds go straight to the word "love". We can forget that the grammar of this sentence is a command that originates in the divine. Sure, we say we know we're supposed to love one another, and ourselves and our God. But how often do we approach love as a fundamental duty that we exercise as subordinates to God?

Consider if you will the difference between a love that we choose on the one hand and this love about which we seemingly have no choice. I've noticed a trend in some weddings I've done recently where the two partners, rather than using the traditional language of "I take you to be my wife", will say to each other with great intention, "I choose you." And I will choose you each and every day of my life! This kind of love that is freely chosen can be an utterly wondrous thing. Its surely something to nurture and to celebrate as I will do when I get married at the end of this summer (You're all invited!). Regardless, whether it is the love we share with a life partner, or even that between beloved family members, or the love between a parent and child, I'm pretty sure we don't need Jesus to tell us to love them, let alone command us to do it? It would be like commanding a child to eat candy or ice cream! Ah shucks, you mean I really *have* to? All right, if you insist!

But when Jesus *commands* us to love one another, to love everybody, he draws us beyond the norms of romantic, platonic and filial love. He draws us to a love where we feel we have no choice. This is the "no questions asked" love of the Hoss Manucy's of our world. This is the love of those who we would prefer not to love. The upside of this duty to love is that where there are no preferences, there can be no disappointment. When I sing I love Hoss Manucy, I don't have to worry if Hoss Manucy is going to love me back! The love which Christ commands of us will not keep us at night worrying