

Your Love Quote

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Church of the Ascension, Chicago

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One of the scribes came near and heard the Saducees disputing with one another, and seeing that Jesus answered them well, he asked him, "Which commandment is the first of all?" Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." Then the scribe said to him, "You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that 'he is one, and besides him there is no other'; and 'to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,' and 'to love one's neighbor as oneself;'-this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." After that no one dared to ask him any question. Mark 12:28-34

In the first of his three New Testament epistles, the Apostle John wrote, "*We love because [God] first loved us.*" (1 John 4:19)

St. Augustine confessed his faith in a loving God when he prayed: "*You are good and all-powerful, caring for each one of us as though the only one in your care ...*" (*Confessions*, c. 397-400)

Teresa of Avila wrote that the truest human love is the "*... desire to please God in everything.*" (*Interior Castle*, 1577)

Mother Teresa of Calcutta, who devoted herself to loving God by loving others, once said, "*Not all of us can do great things. But we can do small things with great love.*"

Recognizing the impossibility of loving others as we do ourselves, Dostoyevsky cautioned that, "*Love in action is a harsh and dreadful thing compared to love in dreams.*" (*Brothers Karamazov*, 1890) How many of us can remember when and how we learned that?

Knowing the futility and horrors of life and societies without love, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "*We must discover the power of love, the redemptive power of love. And when we do that, we will make of this old world a new world. Love is the only way.*" (from a 1957 sermon delivered at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, Montgomery, Alabama)

Jesus of Nazareth often spoke of love in the last days and hours of his earthly life. The scene and dialog in the passage we heard today takes place after he has left Galilee for Jerusalem. He has gone there to share in the ritual Jewish Passover and to give his life, his own great sacrificial offering of love, for his people, for us and for all the world.

During these anticipatory days, Jesus was often at the Temple – the holiest place on earth for the Jewish people but also a meeting place and a market place, a public venue for street preachers and a popular place for theological debates. Here, a scribe asked Jesus, "*Which commandment is the first of all?*" Jesus answered, "*The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and*

with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."

The love of God and neighbor that Jesus commends may be reflected in but it also infinitely transcends any one love story or relationship or example or prayer or religious practice or social movement. In his response to the scribe, Jesus distills and reveals and commends what lies at the heart – or what best lies at the true heart – of all theology and all religious practice and all faithful action. Love God, fully and completely. And love your neighbor as yourself. St. Thomas Aquinas wrote, “The things that we love tell us what we are.”

The fuller teachings and example of Jesus indicate that the commandments to love God and neighbor are inseparable, not merely in theory but in the practice of faith, in our encounters, choices, dreams, words, actions. Rainer Maria Rilke may have been contemplating this when he wrote that, “*For one human being to love another: that is perhaps the most difficult of all our tasks, the ultimate, the last test and proof, the work for which all other work is but preparation.*”

Jesus identifies the two great love-commands in response to a scribe who had been observing a debate between Sadducees. It’s not particularly important here that the debaters were Sadducees. It may matter that they were debating, splitting hairs, denouncing or praising others based on nuances, invoking God, all in the mind and all talk. One may be theologically erudite and yet know little or nothing of God, faithfulness or love. Blaise Pascal wrote, “The knowledge of God is very far from the love of Him.” (Pensées, 1670)

Most or all of us know that the connections between knowledge, love and faith are messy and opaque, or often can be. We fleetingly experience and practice the love of God and neighbor that Jesus commends, and the next moment it’s gone. We thought we understood it, but now we’re not so sure.

The author Christian Wiman cautions: “*... you must realize ... that there is no right way that is going to become apparent to you once and for all. The most blinding illumination that strikes and perhaps radically changes your life will [become] attenuated and obscured by doubts ... the deepest love of your life will work itself like a thorn in your heart until all you can think of is plucking it out. Wisdom is accepting the truth of this. Courage is persisting with life in spite of it.*” (My Bright Abyss: Meditation of a Modern Believer, 2013)

As you may have noticed, my message this morning has included a glut of quotes. Normally I restrict myself to one quote per sermon, or at most two – call it preacher’s portion control. Here I’ve already included many more, partly imagining all of the many voices regularly talking, shouting, arguing, questioning and debating at the Temple in the time of Jesus, in those last days of his life when he himself visited, listened, debated and taught there. Many in the cacophony there claimed to speak with authority in the name of God. They presumed their messages were worthwhile. They aimed to be heard and taken seriously. And how many voices, or dozens of voices, are talking all at once in and around the holy temple of your own life? How many vie for your attention and allegiance? How many voices presume to define God and love for you and me?

Having included so many quotes already, there's still one more I'd love to share, and it's yours. Maybe that quote has yet to be spoken or written or remembered. But imagine in years or centuries to come that some preacher somewhere might say, *'When I think of the two great commandments as Jesus taught them, I recall the words of love spoken by ... you.* You only get one line, but it may be one that will make all the difference in the world for the one who receives it. What will that quote be? How will it show not only your insight and the faith you confessed but also the love of God and neighbor that will make your quote credible by how you lived it? *Amen.*