

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, November 02, 2025
All Saints' Sunday

Procession and Solemn Eucharist
11:00 am

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A Sermon by
The Rev. Dr. Alison Turner

on
Luke 6:20-31

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Called by Name, Knit Together by Grace

All Saints Sunday 2025

One of the great joys of belonging to a church community is the celebration of Holy Baptism. There is a particular moment I cherish at every baptism: the moment when I hear how a child's name was chosen. Sometimes a name is a family name, carried lovingly through generations. Sometimes it is inspired by a saint, a hero, or someone whose life of faith has shaped the family's memory. My own father's middle name, Lincoln, was chosen by my grandparents as a homage to a certain Abraham "across the pond." Names carry stories, they carry hopes. When I was born, my parents had two names at the ready: Stephen if I were a boy, Lisa if a girl. But then my Aunt Rose brought home a poodle puppy just before I was born, and she named her.....Lisa, and so my parents had to begin again. Perhaps you too have your own naming story to share? Whether a name honors both sides of your family, is your adopted or chosen name later in life, or whether the choice is inspired by a patron saint, each name carries a story and bears characteristics that become part of us. And in that story are aspirations and love are knit together. Our name speaks of identity, of belonging, and of a prayer for who we might become in the sight of God.

Today, on this great Feast of All Saints, we remember that the same is true of the saints whose love and witness to our Lord Jesus Christ is born out in their name, their story. This day celebrates Jesus Christ as he is reflected in the lives of his faithful people. We honor not only the great heroes, or those popularized for their patronage like Saint Francis, Saint Teresa, and Saint Patrick, or perhaps on this Marathon Sunday Saint Sebastian, the Patron Saint of runners, as well as those who are remembered for their gifts of witness, comfort and favor. There is also the countless ordinary saints whose names are known only to God. It is a feast for the whole Church, the baptized, that "great cloud of witnesses," described in the Letter to the Hebrew – ordinary people touched by extraordinary grace, who in turn pointed and continue to unite us or knit us together with Christ. As recalled in the collect throughout the church today the Collect for All Saints' Day:

Almighty God you have knit together your elect in one communion and fellowship in the mystical body of your Son Christ our Lord: Give us grace so to follow your blessed saints in all virtuous and godly living, that we may come to those ineffable joys that you have prepared for those who truly love you.....

When we enter this church, this sacred space, we are reminded of that promise of joy and that we are not alone; we are knit together with and surrounded by the saints. They are present not only in stone and glass, but in the very lives and memories of those who have gone before us, and in the faithful gathered beside and around us today. Look at the reredos behind the altar. At first glance, it may appear as a frozen tableau from another time. But look closer: see the faces, the gestures, the symbols they hold, attributes of courage, keys of the kingdom. Each one is a story of grace made visible. They remind us that the same Spirit that worked in them is at work in us now.

During our parish's bicentennial, our choristers were asked a holy and imaginative question: "If we were carving our reredos today, and above our doors on Fifth Avenue, whose figures would we include?" Whose lives, in our time, would we want future generations to see and remember as examples of courage, faith, and love? Perhaps a teacher who loves without weariness. A doctor who serves with mercy. An advocate who stands for justice. A caregiver, a neighbor, a friend—saints of our own age whose holiness shines not necessarily in fame, but in compassion, humility, and steadfast love.

Holiness, you see, is not confined by time, geography, or tradition. Our Episcopal calendar has grown to reflect this truth. Alongside ancient martyrs and monastics, those venerated, beatified and canonized, we now remember modern saints and witnesses: Absalom Jones, the first Black priest in the Episcopal Church; Florence Li Tim-Oi, the first woman ordained in the Anglican Communion; Jonathan Daniels, who gave his life during the Civil Rights Movement; Pauli Murray, priest, scholar, and prophet of justice. The Church adds names not because holiness changes, but because our vision of holiness grows, because the Spirit continues to breathe new life into the communion of saints.

Today, Jesus speaks to us through the Gospel of Luke in the Beatitudes, which are indeed the very keys to the kingdom. He proclaims blessings over those the world often overlooks: the poor, the hungry, the sorrowful, and the persecuted. He calls us to love our enemies, do good to those who hate us, bless those who curse us, and pray for those who mistreat us. This is not a list of impossible ideals; it is the pattern of holiness. Not the pursuit of perfection, but the practice of mercy. They are not about power or prestige, but love and vulnerability. This is what sainthood looks like. A saint is not static, as one preserved in stained glass, nor are they cloaked with perfection. Rather a saint is someone who says "yes" to God, again and again, even when it is sacrificial or costly.

And here, in this very parish, we see glimpses of holiness all the time. In Charles, who in his later years, and even in his recent dying days, drew people together in friendship and grace. In Ruby, a toddler who drops to her knees in reverence before the Blessed Sacrament. In those who call others by name when the world prefers to walk past them unseen. Each quiet act of love, each moment of faithfulness, of lived Beatitudes. These are signs of the kingdom, of holiness, of sainthood.

And then, there is the joyful tradition that has graced our parish in past years as children, sometimes alongside the young at heart, have dressed as saints from around the world. Willem as Saint Sebastian. Gaby as Saint Lucia. Gene as Saint George, courageously wielding not a dragon, but a stuffed snake acquired from the nursery. It is charming, yes, and certainly delightful, but it is also profound. When Heiress came dressed as Saint Elizabeth of Hungary offering bread, or as Joan of Arc, speaking words of courage, and also today as St Agnes, she taught us something holy, that sainthood does not begin in greatness, but in boldness of faith and a spirit of generosity. It begins with active love, with faithfulness, with small acts of selfless courage.

Holiness isn't confined to what we deem to be sacred space. It lives in those who forgive when it costs them something, who keep showing up when it would be easier to walk away, who serve quietly without expecting to be noticed. It is the holiness of those who serve faithfully at the altar and out in the streets, in the lives of those who live the Beatitudes one day at a time. It is found in those who feed the hungry, visit the sick, speak for the voiceless, and pray for those who have no one else to pray for them. Through them, the light of Christ shines, enriching, inspiring and sustaining our journey.

Our rousing hymns today too echo this truth whether, proclaiming, "For all thy saints." Or in or "I Sing a Song of the Saints of God," led earlier today by the Noble Singers, we are reminded the saints are not only figures of the past:

*You can meet them in school, or in lanes, or at sea,
In church, or in trains, or in shops, or at tea;
For the saints of God are just folk like me,
And I mean to be one too.*

That is the heart of this day. All Saints' is not merely a memorial to what has been; it is a vision of what, by God's grace, still can be.

So, I ask you: Who are the saints in your life, the people who have pointed you toward Jesus? Who has shown you his kindness, his strength, his compassion? Was it someone who prayed for you? Or who believed in you? A friend who stayed by your side when others walked away? Perhaps even a stranger whose kindness arrived at just the right moment. They are your saints, your cloud of witnesses.

And now, beloved, it is our turn. Our turn to carry the light forward. Our turn to live lives of mercy, justice, and love. Our turn to make the world a little brighter with the light of Christ.

For in baptism, each of us is sealed with the spirit, named and claimed as Christ's own forever. We belong to that great communion of saints. Not just one day, but every day. So let us take our place among them: putting our faith into action with courage, loving with abandon, and shining with the light of the One who is holy, Jesus Christ our Lord.
