

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, October 04, 2026
Francis of Assisi

**Solemn Eucharist to Celebrate the 800th
Anniversary of the Death of St. Francis**
11:00 am

+

A Sermon by
The Rev. Prisca Lee-Pae
on
Matthew 11:25-30
+

A Different Kind of Wisdom

Happy Feast of St. Francis!

When Episcopalians recite the Apostles' or Nicene Creed, we affirm our belief in the "Communion of Saints." This expresses the spiritual bond that unites all Christians across time and space.

In the Episcopal Church, saints are not distant figures placed on pedestals, nor are they simply channels through whom miracles happen. They are our elder sisters and brothers in faith—people who show us what it looks like to follow Jesus in an actual human life.

Which saints do you personally hold dear?

For me, there have been several unexpected moments that have drawn me close to St. Francis. Once, I joined a project to write a book introducing saints to children, and, quite by chance, I was assigned St. Francis. That assignment led me to study his life more deeply. Around the same time, one of my best friends was a Franciscan friar, so I often visited monasteries and convents, and spent time with Nuns and Monks there.

My parents became rather worried during that period. They were afraid that I might decide to join a religious order myself! I did get married, much to my parents' relief—but it turns out that my husband is a member of the Third Order of Society of St. Francis which is the Secular Franciscan Order.

So perhaps Francis has been following me for a long time.

And yet, although Francis feels particularly close to me, the truth is that we have all been influenced by him, whether we realize it or not.

Think, for example, of the Nativity scene—the crèche that we set up every Christmas. St. Francis is traditionally credited with beginning this practice when, in 1223, he created a living representation of the Nativity at Greccio. At a time when many ordinary people could not easily understand the Latin liturgy, Francis helped them encounter the mystery of Christ's birth through something they could see and touch.

Francis understood that faith is not only something we explain with words. It is something we encounter with our whole selves.

His influence can also be seen in art. Medieval Christian art often emphasized the majesty and transcendence of God, sometimes portraying holy figures in rather formal and rigid ways. Francis, however, drew attention to the poverty, vulnerability, and humanity of Jesus. Through the artists who portrayed Francis and the stories of his life—most famously Giotto—we begin to see human faces, tears, gestures, landscapes, and emotions rendered with a new naturalness. In many ways, Francis helped open the imagination of Western Christianity to seeing the sacred within the ordinary and the human.

Why do people love Francis so deeply—a man born to a wealthy cloth merchant who could have lived a life of comfort and affluence, yet chose to abandon it all for a life of poverty?

He cared for lepers, people whom society rejected, as though they were his own flesh and blood. He called the sun his brother and the moon his sister. He regarded animals and plants not simply as things placed beneath human dominion, but as fellow creatures with whom we share this world.

And at a time when the Church had become increasingly identified with wealth, power, and institutional authority, Francis heard God's call to "repair my church."

At first, he thought perhaps God was asking him to rebuild a physical church. But the deeper meaning became clear: Francis himself was being called to participate in the renewal of the Church.

In the midst of this situation, Christ did not first call a powerful bishop or a great theologian to repair the Church. He called a young man who had chosen poverty, simplicity, and the Gospel.

And perhaps this is where today's Gospel speaks so powerfully.

Jesus says, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants."

We all want to be wise and intelligent. We value knowledge, education, competence, and expertise. And there is nothing wrong with these things. They can be wonderful gifts in the service of God.

But Jesus reminds us that the deepest things of God cannot be possessed simply through intelligence.

Why have we so earnestly desired to be wise and intelligent? Perhaps because, in this world, wisdom and intelligence often mean power and capability. The more we know, the more we can control. The more capable we are, the more influence we may have.

But before God, there is another kind of wisdom.

It is the wisdom of becoming like a child—not childish, but childlike: trusting, receptive, vulnerable, willing to receive rather than insisting that we already know.

St. Paul says in his First Letter to the Corinthians, "Christ crucified is a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called, Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God."

The cross itself appeared foolish according to the standards of the world.

And yet, Paul says, this very foolishness is the wisdom of God.

God does not always work according to the standards by which the world measures strength, success, intelligence, and power.

God chooses what appears weak to reveal strength.

God chooses what appears foolish to reveal wisdom.

And God chose Francis—not because Francis was the most powerful or learned person of his time, but because he was willing to become small enough to receive God’s love and obedient enough to follow where that love led him.

There is a beautiful story about Francis that illustrates this.

Francis once walked through the freezing snow with his companion, Brother Leo. As they walked toward their friary, Francis turned to him and asked:

Brother Leo, imagine if all the professors from the University of Paris, all the bishops and cardinals, and even the kings of France and England were to join our brotherhood... Do you think that would be perfect joy? No.” Francis asked again, “Imagine if our friars became the most powerful preachers in the world—converting everyone, performing miracles, and being revered as saints by all. Would that be perfect joy? No.

Finally, Francis said:

Imagine we arrive at the friary exhausted, frozen, and hungry—and when we knock, the door is slammed in our face. We are cursed, called thieves, and left standing outside in the bitter cold. If, even then, we can remain patient, peaceful, and loving, without bitterness or resentment... that is where perfect joy is found.

We usually think joy comes when things go well: when we are recognized, successful, admired, welcomed, or appreciated.

Francis says something radically different.

Perfect joy is not found in being powerful.

It is not found in being admired.

It is not even found in being successful in our ministry.

Perfect joy is found in remaining rooted in love when everything we hoped for has been taken away.

That is the wisdom of the cross.

And perhaps that is why Francis continues to speak to us after eight hundred years.

He reminds us that the renewal of the Church does not begin with becoming more impressive. It begins with becoming more receptive to God.

It begins with the heart of a child.

It begins when we are willing to let go of our need to control, to be recognized, to be right, or to appear successful—and simply ask, “Lord, what are you asking of me?”

Eight hundred years after Francis’s death, his presence, his love, his humility, and his teaching have not disappeared. They continue to resonate because God is still at work through the same spirit that animated Francis.

And perhaps that is why we are gathered here today.

Something in Francis’s innocence, sincerity, humility, and love echoes within us.

Something in his simple and wholehearted confession, “My God, my all,” still speaks to us and calls us to place our whole lives in God’s hands.

May we learn from Francis to become wise in the way of the cross.

May we become childlike enough to receive what God wants to give us.

May we have the courage to love those whom the world overlooks.

And may God use our small acts of faithfulness, as God used Francis’s, to renew the Church and bring wholeness to the world.

Peace and All Good!

The Rev. Juyoung Prisca Lee-Pae

Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
