SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, October 25, 2026
The Feast of the Anniversary of the Dedication of the Church

Solemn Eucharist
11:00 am

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A Sermon by
The Rev. Canon Carl Turner

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"Love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action." (1 John 3:18)

A sermon for the start of the 2027 Annual Appeal

"Words! Words! Words! I'm so sick of words! I get words all day through; first from him, now from you! Is that all you blighters can do? Don't talk of stars burning above; if you're in love, show me!" The famous words of Eliza to Freddy in the Broadway musical 'My Fair Lady' of 1956.

Saint Thomas Church stands on Fifth Avenue as a sign of God's love on the busiest shopping street of the world of the city that never sleeps. In our bicentennial year, we adopted that as the strapline for our worship bulletins – *God's love at the heart of New York.* As we begin our Annual Appeal for 2027, we continue to explore the three words at the heart of our mission statement – Worship, Love, and Serve our Lord Jesus Christ…And this year, we explore the word **love.** How do we love Jesus? And what difference will that kind of love make to our lives?

The answer is, I believe, found in the First Letter of John: "*In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us." (1 John 4:10-12)*

Not that we loved God, but that he loved us…words, as Eliza so rightly said, are never enough, so God revealed the depth of his love when '*the Word* became flesh and lived among us.'(John 1:14a)

We have begun our Annual Appeal for 2027 and, appropriately, today, we celebrate the Dedication of this church building.

I was once told that I should be careful about preaching about love. I was told that love was an easy way out of the world's difficult questions; that as a preacher I would have more success getting people to think about judgement and repentance rather than preaching about love. In one respect that person was right – the preacher should certainly be careful about preaching about love because love is not weak; it is not an easy way out; love is not woke; love is not 'anything goes; love is at the heart of what it is to be human because it is at the heart of what it is to be God, who is *pure love*. As we read in 1 John, *'We love because God first loved us.'*

In his sermon last Sunday, Archbishop Rowan reminded us that we are made in the image and likeness of God. And because God loved us first, that ability *to love* has become one of the hallmarks of being human. It affects all our relationships – with one another, with our planet and the created order; even the way we

view ourselves. And before you think that I am promoting psycho-babble, I want to suggest that love is hard because God does want us to learn how to love ourselves too. As St. Paul said to the Roman Church, *'love is the fulfilling of the law.'* (Romans 13:10b) and by becoming true to ourselves, and recognizing that God loves us for who we *are* and not for who we think or (worse) what others think we ought to be, we deepen that sense of God's image in us.

It is precisely because we are made in God's likeness that we are to love our neighbor – not because it makes us a better person, but because it helps perfect God's love in us. Love is a powerful force for change; love not only changes relationships, it helps the church to become a beloved community that bears witness to the presence of God in a broken and fragmented world. And if you want another example of how costly love can be, think of the New Testament word for bearing witness – which we translate as *martyr.*

I have been thinking a lot about a phrase that Archbishop Rowan used in his lecture last week; that, 25 years since 9/11, *"the world has become more entangled but not more connected."* Could it be that it is the absence of love that stops the interconnectedness of our world? Can love be the catalyst for change?

Do you remember one of the iconic photographs from the time of the Vietnam War protest taken by Bernie Boston in October, 1967? As the protesters approached the Pentagon, Military police confronted them with weapons raised. Some of the police were not much older than the students protesting. A young man stepped forward with a bunch of flowers and started placing them individually in into the barrels of the rifles. For a brief moment, love turned a weapon that could kill into a simple vase.

As Henri Nouwen once put it, *"Love...is not a clinging to each other in the fear of an on-coming disaster but an encounter with the freedom that allows for the creation of new life."* [1]

You can turn a weapon into a vase.

Love is at the heart of our Christian life—the work of seeing one another as God sees us: beloved, worthy of dignity, and called into deeper relationship with him and with one another. That love is alive at Saint Thomas: in the flourishing collaboration between the Choir School and the Professional Children's School; in growing ministries with children, youth, and families; in Neighbor to Neighbor; in music that lifts our hearts toward God; and in the countless acts of welcome, generosity, and prayer that binds us together as a parish and carries the hope of Christ into the world.

If you have attended worship or one of our coffee hours or social events over the past few months you cannot but have noticed the sense of **joy** that flows from a church trying to exemplify a Beloved Community. That same joy radiates from the many volunteers who give of their time every Saturday morning when we share the love of Christ with our neighbors who are poor, homeless, or suffering from food insecurity.

Words are not enough. Again, the author of the First Letter of John puts it succinctly: *'Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.'* (1 John 3:18)

My dear friends, our Annual Appeal of last year was the most successful in the past 10 years. In that year, we explored the word 'worship.' Worship leads us to experience love – love of God and love of neighbor. By supporting our Annual Appeal, you commit yourself to this radical Christian understanding of love.

And, here, I want to speak directly to those of you who worship with us on-line day by day, and week by week, or even occasionally. There are thousands of you, and so many of tell me how you feel that you belong to Saint Thomas Church – part of this Community, across the miles. We need your support too. It takes at least three staff members to ensure that the livestream of worship, education, and concerts is of the highest quality that you have come to expect. Some of you have become members of the Keystone Society – and pledge a minimum of $5,000 per year – under $100 a week – to preserve this on-line ministry. I invite you (no matter how small or how great it can be) to make a pledge to our annual appeal to help us deepen our vision to be a sign of God’s love at the heart of New York – but a love that flows out into the world, touching the lives of so many.

My dear friends, we live in a world that, as Archbishop Rowan has suggested is entangled and yet so disconnected; a world where there is so much that divides and separates us one from another. The love of Jesus Christ is the antidote to all the hate and anger and mistrust in our world. And we, here at Saint Thomas, can play our part in bringing some of that love to bear.

Let me end with some words of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. He was once asked a hard question about the relationship of love and his way of non-violence and racial justice. The questioner seemed a little angry to me and suggested that love might be the easy way out and that, perhaps the time had come to respond to bigotry and hatred like-with-like. Even though noble, he suggested, wasn’t love actually impractical against people intent on violence and terror? In his answer, Dr. King said this: “*Love is creative and redemptive. Love builds up and unites; hate tears down and destroys. The aftermath of the ‘fight with fire’ method which you suggest is bitterness and chaos, the aftermath of the love method is reconciliation and creation of the beloved community.*” [2]

References

1 ‘Reaching Out – the three movements of the spiritual life.’ Doubleday & Company, 1975.

2 Advice for Living’ Article in*Ebony*, November 1957. p. 106