Running with the Saints

A sermon by the Rev. Canon Lauren Holder
The Sunday after All Saints' Day

I love All Saints Sunday. We get to sleep in an extra hour. We get to baptize new saints and renew our own baptismal covenant. We get to remember all the saints who have gone before us—people we look up to and love and want to feel near us. It really is, as our collect says, a knitting together of one communion, where the love of God connects us all, transcending time and space.

And we get to sing some of my favorite hymns! "For all the saints" and "I sing of song of the saints of God" are two of the songs of my heart.

Interestingly, All Saints Sunday also happens to coincide—every year since 1970—with the New York City Marathon. And while this is particularly difficult for churches near the marathon course trying to celebrate a principal feast with baptisms and special music and all-the-things, it also feels like another beautiful expression of the Kingdom of God.

You see, the New York City Marathon is what we call a point-to-point race. That means it is not a loop. It begins in one place and runs through all five boroughs of the city, traversing multiple bridges, and ends in a completely different place, 26.2 miles away. The starting place is Staten Island, and then the first 2.5 miles of the race are spent running across the Verrazzano Bridge.

The interesting thing about the Verrazzano Bridge is that it's a two-story bridge. It has a top layer, and it has a bottom layer. So when you line up in your assigned group to start the marathon, you are funneled into either the top layer of the bridge, or the bottom layer of the bridge.

Just imagine this… thousands of runners moving through space and time, some up here, some down here, some farther ahead, some behind, every shape, size, ability, all of them breathing the same air, hearts full, adrenaline high… it's really a moving way to begin, in every sense of the word.

Once you get over the bridge, a beautiful thing occurs: these two streams of people from the upper and lower decks of the bridge come together as one current of moving bodies. It's almost like looking at a zipper. It is, I think, a beautiful image of community being knit together.

And it's not just the people running. Once you get over that first bridge, the streets are lined on either side with people cheering. Cheering on people they know, yes, but mostly cheering on total strangers. Go, go, go! You got this! Keep it up! It is truly a great cloud of witnesses and it is truly inspiring.

There was one year the New York City Marathon did not take place, in 2012 immediately following Hurricane Sandy. I was living in New York at the time, and I was supposed to run the marathon that year. Instead, I was living "SOPO" as we called it, meaning South Of Power. With no power in Lower Manhattan, there was no heat. And it was cold. But there was also no way for people unable to climb up and down stairs to leave their high-rise apartments to get groceries. It was a scary time.

And so the community was knit together in a different way. We collected blankets and water bottles and all of that, but on the morning when I would have been running the marathon, I was instead doling out bowls of oatmeal, kept warm in the trunk of my colleague Mother Carla's car.

I remember the moment power was restored to Lower Manhattan. I had been uptown, and was headed back

home on a south-bound train. I was sitting next to my mom, who had come into town to cheer me on for the marathon that didn't happen. We were pulling into Union Station, which was as far south as the subway could go.

But then a voice came over the intercom stating: *this train now runs all the way to Canal Street*. Oh, how we all rejoiced! Strangers hugging each other and laughing… in a space where people typically look down at their phones and avoid any-and-all connection, we were instead making eye contact and exchanging high-fives. Our shared difficulty in the wake of Hurricane Sandy became a poignant reminder of our shared humanity… and then, in this moment, our shared relief and joy. I'll never forget it.

All of this speaks to today's Gospel, when Jesus sees a big crowd, not unlike a crowd of people running through the streets, or a crowd of people cheering them on, or a crowded subway train. Jesus sees this crowd and imagines all that they represent—their stories, their contexts, the things that are unique to them and the things they all share in common. Jesus sees this crowd and sees the face of God before him.

And then he starts blessing them, calling out the blessing they already are. And it's a collective blessing. No one is alone. Blessed *are* the poor in spirit, for *theirs* is the kingdom of heaven. Not his or hers… but *theirs*. Blessed *are* those who mourn, for *they* will be comforted. Blessed *are* the meek, for *they* will inherit the earth. Do you hear the community Jesus is naming and knitting together in his words? No one is alone in their blessing.

All Saints is a celebration of the blessing of being knit together in one communion. All Saints is a celebration of the blessing we share with one another by being present to one another in God's presence. All Saints is a celebration of the love that connects us, a love stronger than death.

Now we get to baptize these saints into this communion, into this fellowship. The truth is, they are already blessed. God chose them and blessed them when God chose to create them in all the wonder and mystery that they are.

We get to claim and celebrate the blessing they already are through the sacrament of baptism, and then we get to receive the blessing of being knit together with them in the Body of Christ. We get to cheer them on as they run their race—Go! Go! Go! You got this! Keep it up! We get to suffer with them when times are hard, helping one another with whatever we can offer. And when we make it through those hard times, we get to celebrate what we have become, a people who care for one another and bless one another in the love of Christ.

Amen.