“Of all the saints, [he] is perhaps the most popular and admired but probably the least imitated; few have attained to his total identification with the poverty and suffering of Christ’

That is a direct quotation from our Church’s volume entitled *Lesser Feasts and Fasts*. I have omitted only the name. If you haven’t guessed yet, I’ll give you another hint: “[He] left few writings; but, of those, his spirit of joyous faith comes through most truly in the “canticle of the Sun . . . [the] version in *The Hymnal* begins . . .

Most High, omnipotent, good Lord,

To thee be ceaseless praise outpoured,--

And blessing without measure.

Let creatures all give thanks to thee

And serve in great humility.”

Well, you’ve got it now, haven’t you. Francis of Assisi, Friar and Deacon, born in 1182, died in 1226, made a saint in 1228.

We celebrated his feast day on October 4 with a blessing of animals, as we have often done, along with thousands of parish churches across the globe.

Why this association of animals with Francis? According to numerous sources on occasion he preached to birds, mainly giving thanks to God for them and the way God clothes them. In other words, giving thanks for God’s many gifts to all of us.It certainly seems in keeping with his gentle nature and his own words in “The Canticle of the Sun,” referring to brother sun and sister moon, sister water, brother fire, mother earth, and sister death, and, of course, those closing words, “Let creatures all give thanks to thee, and serve in great humility.” So Francis’s conviction that we are all one went beyond all living, breathing creatures—to the elements and elemental forces themselves.

This sense of being one with God’s creation moved him to legendary acts of love and generosity, embracing and kissing the hand of a leper, renouncing the wealth he had inherited from his father, a wealthy merchant, even to the point of stripping himself naked and giving his clothes to the poor.

And of course he founded (it may be more accurate to say he allowed an order for men to *be* founded), and through his sister one for women. Their original rule was simply, “Follow the Gospel.” Trusting in God and sharing the good news were his aims.

All of this he accomplished not in some tight-lipped, stern, way, but with joyful heart, even through the emotional and physical suffering of his last years, blind and bearing the signs of the cross—the stigmata—in his own flesh. Earlier his own order had outgrown him, and he renounced any role of leadership in order to be one more brother among brothers.

You might be thinking, “but today we are celebrating *all* the saints, not just this one who lived and died nine hundred years ago.” And you’re right. As the hymn has it, “there are hundreds of thousands still.”

Francis chose me for this sermon rather than the other way around. That phrase “of all the saints, the most admired and least imitated” echoed in my brain as I started thinking about All Saints this year. Francis certainly exemplifies sainthood, meaning that he is someone through whom the light of Christ and the love of God continue to shine.

Lazarus is another of those conduits of divine light and love. He lived as long before Francis as Francis lived before us. His is a far different story, insofar as we know his story at all.

Lazarus was a brother to Mary and Martha and a dear friend of Jesus. That’s about it in terms of what we know. We are told nothing he might have done to deserve being raised from the dead. This is not a story about the saintly life of Lazarus the man; it is a story of God’s indiscriminate love for everyone, a love more powerful than death. And that places him firmly in the epic story of the saints. For with or without colorful stories and adventures, the lives of the saints are more about God than about themselves.

Lazarus and Francis and people you and I have known are all saints of God. In some that divine light shines more brightly than in others, and we can see their participation in their holy lives of service to God and neirhbor. Others have been put to good use by God often in ways they themselves do not understand.

Lazarus was the instrument of God’s stunning love and power over death without his having done anything remarkable. In the person of Jesus, God made that love manifest in a unique way.

Francis evidently knew about and was awakened by the light of Christ and felt an urgency to make this good news of God’s love known to others. His calling was to help others become aware of the same and to spread that light throughout the world in every way possible. May we open ourselves as part of the Body of Christ, the communion of all the saints, to the ways in which God may use us and allow ourselves to become instruments of God’s peace. + + +