In this morning’s reading from Galatians, the apostle Paul talks about how we should treat one another within the Christian community. He envisions a Christian community based on care and compassion, love and forgiveness. He sees the Church as a community that exhibits the fruit of the Spirit: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.”

Paul emphasizes that we have mutual responsibility for one another. “Bear one another’s burdens,” he says, “and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.” Soon thereafter, he also says that “all must carry their own loads.”

Each of us has our own work to do, whether it be working on our own personal growth and development, holding down a job, raising up a child, getting through school, or serving in the community. And we ought to take pride in the work we are doing, whatever it may be. We all must carry our own loads.

But that doesn’t mean we have to do our work alone, in isolation from others, without the support and encouragement of colleagues, friends, and family members, without a community to walk with us on our journey and to hold us up in prayer. The Church is supposed to be that community where we find safety and strength, where we are fed and nurtured, where we learn and grow, where we find the support and encouragement we need. The Church is a place where we bear one another’s burdens – where we weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice.

Just as we are mutually responsible for one another, we are also mutually accountable to one another. Christian community is not a utopia. We Christians are human beings just like everyone else, warts and all. We make mistakes. We sin against God and one another. We hurt one another, intentionally and unintentionally. Some people outside the Church look at us and think we are a bunch of hypocrites, saying one thing and doing another. But what they don’t understand is: the Church is not a society of saints. The Church is a hospital for sinners. We don’t claim to be perfect. Indeed, every Sunday in our prayer of confession, we acknowledge our faults, we ask God’s forgiveness, we seek healing for ourselves and others, and we go out into the world again to try and live faithfully once more.

Being part of the Christian community holds us mutually accountable. That doesn’t mean that we should go around judging and condemning others, though unfortunately that’s exactly how many people perceive Christians -- as being judgmental, self-righteous, and intolerant. Rather, it means that in humility we should be supporting, encouraging, and uplifting one another. “If anyone is detected in a transgression,” Paul says, we shouldn’t condemn that person. We shouldn’t ostracize them. We shouldn’t kick them out of the community. No, on the contrary, Paul says we “should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness.”
In addition to our mutual responsibility for one another, Paul reminds us that we will reap whatever we sow. Like a gardener, if we plant tomato seeds, we get tomatoes. If we plant thistles, we get thistles. The wonderful thing about this metaphor is that it acknowledges that actions have consequences, but not necessarily immediate consequences. A lot of time may go by. Months may need to pass between planting time and harvest time. Nevertheless, eventually, we will reap whatever we have sown.

If we sow to our own flesh, that is, if we focus on our own narrow self-interests, in opposition to God and at the expense of the community’s well-being, we “will reap corruption from the flesh.” But if we “sow to the Spirit,” that is, if we “live by the Spirit” and allow ourselves to “be guided by the Spirit,” we open ourselves to the possibility of God’s Spirit bearing fruit in us, and Paul promises, we “will reap eternal life from the Spirit.”

Our actions, whether good or bad, will eventually have like consequences. If we make a habit of deceiving other people, we shouldn’t be surprised if other people try to deceive us. On the other hand, if we have a reputation of being honest and truthful with other people, we will probably find that other people are usually honest and truthful with us, too. Our actions have consequences. It may be a long time in coming, but what goes around comes around. Paul encourages us to persevere, to “not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest-time, if we do not give up.”

Paul’s reminder that actions have consequences and his urging to persevere and not give up prompts me to share with you my own greatest fear as I prepare to leave Light Street Church. My fear is that when I leave this church, some of you will decide to leave, too. I noticed that when I was away a couple of Sundays ago to attend the General Assembly in Portland, Oregon, there were only 13 people in worship! That’s less than half of our average worship attendance. I suppose it’s possible that the low turnout was because it was Father’s Day, not because there was a guest preacher in the pulpit. I don’t know. But I do know that if your connection to this church is based more on who the pastor is than on your relationship to God in Jesus Christ or to your relationship with the people who make up this church community, then I have done you a disservice. All along, I’ve tried to point to God, to Jesus, to the Holy Spirit. All along I’ve tried to emphasize the importance of being church, of belonging to and participating in a Christian community. If you have focused on me as Light Street’s pastor rather than on that to which I have been pointing – namely, God and the Church – then I’ve not done a very good job.

After I leave next Sunday, if you say to yourselves, “well, Roger isn’t preaching at Light Street any more, so I guess I’ll skip worship today,” that could very well be the death knell for this congregation. You are Light Street Church. Without you, without your participation and involvement in this church family, all that would be left here is an empty building. Now, of course, this church building can be appreciated for its architectural merit or its historical significance. But if it ends there, it is nothing more than a monument, a cultural artifact from a bygone era. What makes this church building much more than that is you -- your presence here as a living, breathing worshipping community. Without you, without an active, thriving congregation seeking to do God’s will in this place, this building might just as well be turned into a museum or a restaurant or converted into condos. Your being here makes all the difference. If this church matters to you, if your relationship to God in Jesus Christ matters to you, I urge you during this time of transition to increase your participation
and involvement in the life of this congregation, not to decrease it. Your church family needs you now more than ever.

“So then,” Paul says, “whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith.” We have a special responsibility to work for the good of our church family -- the members of our congregation and the wider Christian community. But our responsibility goes even further. It extends beyond the Church to include all people, the wider community, the whole world. “Whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all.” In other words, we are to work for the common good, for the good of everyone, not just ourselves.

Work for the good of all and don’t give up! For Paul, these are Christian values. I hope that they are still American values as well. I hope that in spite of our culture of extreme individualism, we can still put our own personal self-interests aside from time to time and practice our love of neighbor by actively working for the common good. Our country will be the better for it. May it be so. Amen!