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May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.
Amen.

Reading the lesson from Romans I am reminded of family and as an extension of community. Partly because of what one of my sisters would say when my brothers and I would get a little out of hand as we wrestled and fought growing up. The oldest of my sisters was really a girl, always in a dress, playing with dolls and working to be sure we all got along. Growing up I am not sure she really understood why boys fight. My brothers and I were boys and we often wrestled and played rough with each other. It sometimes did not take much for us while wrestling or playing rough to go a little too far, then it would be an all out fight, especially if Mom would be gone for a short time leaving my older brother in charge. But more than once when our play wrestling would get out of hand, my sister would stand there crying and pleading with us to stop. She would say things like, 'your brothers, your family, you are not suppose to fight each other but you are to love each other.'

I give thanks most every day because I realize now, even more than I did growing up that I grew up in a well functioning family who practiced forgiveness and mutual support. But we did not always deal so effectively with confrontation, especially when my parents and my grandparents disagreed over little things like when or how often the family would gather for

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a meal or celebration. My Dad's siblings were either not married or married with no kids and they lived a couple miles from my grandparents. Except for a few years, we always lived in a different town, sometimes hours away. So for years my grandmother had a hard time understanding why we could not show up every Saturday night for hamburgers at their house. I remember more than once my mother biting her tongue and packing us up for the sake of peace in the family. That is not to say we did not have a good time or enjoyed ourselves, for we did. It was just that my family had our own plans many times yet my grandmother was insistent we come and gather with them.

One the other side of the family things we differently as my mother's family was a lot easier going about such gatherings. But if mom and her sisters and even her mother did not agree on something they would just stop talking and communicating with each other, sometimes for months at a time. Living within a family, existing within a community is hard work.

Families are in many ways small communities, our families are the place where we learn how to live together. In our families we learn how to listen to each other, to come to the aid of someone in need, to disagree with respect and to love others even when we do not like them very much.

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Communities on the other hand can be a place where people live with nothing in common except an address or a town. Most of you live in or around Platteville. Yet you are very different from each other, some of you have families who have lived here for generations while many others of you have moved here recently for a job or school.

Communities can also be a place where people with common interest or hobbies or vocations gather to share stories in support of each other. Most of us are a part of many different social groups at the golf course, the coffee shop, the library or lunch room discussing a class or an assignment. These communities are face to face conversations with other like minded people.

Then especially for the younger generations, there are the social networks and cell phones that allow people to be community without being face to face with the person you are communicating with. All of these ways are ways to build and maintain community yet we all know from experience gathering and maintaining community can be a difficult task.

Thomas Merton, a religious writer and a member of a religious order wrote about the religious community he was a part of for many years. Every prospective participant was initially brought in and made to stand in the center of a circle formed by the current members. There he was asked by the abbot, "What do you come seeking?"

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The answers varied, in line with the individual's recent experiences. Some said, 'I come seeking a deeper relationship with God.' Others were more pragmatic; 'I desire to become more disciplined in my practices of life.' And a few were simply running away, 'I hope to find solace from the world and refuge from the problems that have plagued me.'

Merton writes, there was really only one answer which all needed to voice before they could take up residence. 'I need mercy.' That was the true cry of the heart, 'I need mercy.'

Merton said that any other answer betrayed our prideful assertion of self-determination. We wanted, we planned, we were running away from, we desired.' But the person who knew his need of mercy has stepped out of the myopic circle of self-interest long enough to begin to see the fragile interdependence of all who were taken into the larger fellowship of faith.

We as individual cannot create community, for community does not revolve around us. We can only enter into a community or receive it as a gift. Hence, we need mercy in order to walk through its door. Paul saw mercy as the public show of redemptive love.

Paul speaks of love as the fulfillment of the law. For him love is the embodiment and the accumulation of all the commandments into one single act. God first gave the commandments to the people of Israel as a way of building

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community. The people of Israel as they fled slavery were unorganized, living as family clans and were not a cohesive society. So God gave them the laws to give them structure and common rules by which they could set themselves apart in the world they lived in. Ultimately God was trying to make them into one family, into his family, to live as one people, a community setting the example for the rest of the world.

Today we gather as a part of that family of God, as a community of faith as members of First English. In many ways today and next week, we are re-gathering after the summer months separated us with vacations and camp, with trips to visit family or the cabin up north. Today we re-gather as a community seeking to re-connect and remember who we are as a community of faith. To once again take seriously our baptismal promises to gather as a community in mutual love and support, to teach and to learn, to worship and to praise the one in whose name we gather. Today we gather as a community in the name of Jesus, in a place where he promises to meet us. For where two or three are gathered in his name, there he is also.

The author Anne Lamott in her book, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith*, tells why she makes her teenage son, Sam, go to church ...

"I make him go because I can ... I outweigh him by nearly 75 pounds. But that is only part of it. The main reason is that I want to give him what I found in the

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world, which is to say a path and a little light to see by. Most of the people I know who have what I want — which is to say, purpose, heart, balance, gratitude, joy — are people with a deep sense of spirituality. They are people in community, who pray, or practice their faith — people banding together to work on themselves and for human rights. They follow a brighter light than the glimmer of their own candle; they are part of something beautiful.”

Those of us gathered here are a part of the community of Christ, growing together as part of the family of God, gathering to practice that faith, to practice living with others. We gather with the community seeking forgiveness for our sins and granting pardons to those who have sinned against us. We gather in support of each other to lay aside the works of darkness and to help each other put on the armor of light, to live honorably and put on our Lord Jesus Christ. We gather today to welcome the stranger and the outsider, the tax collector and the Gentile into our community so that we all might be one family. Bound together in mutual concern and affection, as we gather in the name of Christ our Savior in this place where He has promised to meet us. We gather here set free by the gift of grace, owning no one anything except the love we have for one another.

AMEN

T.G.B.T.G.

Pastor Michael