



Ephesians 4:11-16

4th Message

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# PARTICIPATION IN GOD'S WORK

*SERIES: PBCC FAMILY VALUES*

When I was nine, my family moved to Wales and joined a small, family-friendly church of about 120 people. The greatest strength of this church was evangelism, and every summer they would have three, week-long Beach Missions, back to back to back. The team would meet up on Saturday, take part in our Sunday morning service, and then drive the twenty minutes to Saundersfoot, one of the more touristy towns in the area. (You should know that the economy of this area of Wales was half farming and half tourism. Since Wales is a triangle stuck on the side of England, and we lived in the tip of the triangle, there were beautiful beaches on all sides.) Once in Saundersfoot, the team stayed in a community center where they spent the morning prepping, practicing music, skits, and getting everything ready. After lunch, they would go down to the beach and get as many of the kids on the beach as they could for games, songs, skits, and stories, followed by an evening meeting on the harbortop. All of these events were accompanied by evangelistic efforts involving tracts, as well as just talking to kids, parents, and random people, building relationships and seeking to bless people. There were families who came to Saundersfoot on holiday every year and eagerly awaited the Beach Mission team!

And me? Well, I desperately wanted to be a part of the team and to wear the awesome, bright yellow polo shirt. There was just one problem: I was nine, and you had to be sixteen! So I waited seven long years. Finally, in the summer of 2002, I turned sixteen and joined my first Beach Mission team.

It was amazing! Being shy, it definitely pushed me out of my comfort zone, but there's no way anyone could have convinced me not to do it. The team was mostly people from the church, but there were also a significant number of people from around the UK, who somehow had connections with the church and joined us each summer. It was an incredibly diverse and varied team. I would say ages sixteen to sixty, but it was more like sixteen to eighty and everyone was an equal member of the team, including those (like me!) who were only sixteen.

I learned a lot. I grew substantially in my faith. I made many new friends, and built some great relationships!

When I went to college in Durham, I knew it was important to find a church, and I chose one that highly valued the bible (since I highly valued the bible, and my church in Wales hadn't been strong on bible training). During my first year of college, I made some great friends at this church and enjoyed the serious bible study and teaching. There was just one problem; even though I was highly motivated to be a part of the church, I was constantly being checked up on. If I missed a meeting, someone wanted to know why. Why, if I loved Jesus, was I not at the meeting? Things really came to a head when I started dating this American girl, Kady, who was obviously an idol in my life, and everyone was very concerned about me. Also, the awesome friends I'd made in the first year were much less awesome by third year. The church had changed them. Instead of fun-loving guys, full of life and desiring to learn about Jesus, they were duty-bound, efficient, worker bees at the church.

I learned a lot at this church, too. I became wiser, battle-tested, and I picked up some scars. I made many new friends, and lost most of them!

Both churches would be considered to be "doing God's work," and both wanted their members to "participate." So where did they differ? I believe that it was the motivation and foundation of the church that made all the difference in the world. One was built on relationships and the other was built on theological principles. While both are important, they are two very different sources of motivation.

No matter how important the theological principles may be, God desires first and foremost to be in relationship with us. Of this there can be no doubt! God makes it abundantly clear throughout the course of salvation history: beginning with Adam and Eve (who broke our relationship with God) and culminating with Jesus (who restored our relationship with God at the cross).

God desires to be in relationship with us. He doesn't have to desire this, but He does! It's incredibly humbling, but it's the truth! What do you do with someone that you want to be in relationship with? You share your heart with them! You want them to be excited about what excites you! Ultimately you want them to be involved and participate in the things that you care about!

And guess what?

So does God!

God desires for those who are in a relationship with him to care about the things he cares about! To desire the things he desires. To participate with him in the ways that he is working in the world, bringing healing and restoration, redemption and hope, love and life.

In human relationships, we often end up trying to force or manipulate the participation that we want out of people. But God never forces; God invites.

God invites us to participate! So just for a moment, would you let go of your cultural Christianity and what it has taught you about duty, obligation, and guilt? Just for a moment, would you let go of your past church experiences with guilt-tripping, pressure, and legalism? Just for a moment, would you let go of your past experiences with Christians who manipulate, judge, or hate? Just for a moment, would you consider this: that God desires to be in a relationship with you, and within that relationship, He invites you to participate!

It's a marvelous, gentle invitation, and not an onerous duty or burden. It changes things when we view God in this light. It changes things a lot!

Hold onto this, because it's the frame of reference through which we are going to consider our third PBCC Family Value: Participation In God's Work.

On that note, it's wonderful to have our eighth grade girls' small group participating in various ways in our service this morning, reading the Call to Worship, greeting, and serving communion later.

The purpose of this series is for you to know our Family Values—the reasons we chose each one, the motivations behind them, and how they drive us forward as a church. This value is derived from our original Ministry of the Saints value (long time PBCC-ers, this will be familiar to you). We've simply freshened up the language and expanded its sphere of influence. It remains, however, deeply rooted in words of Ephesians:

**So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.**

**Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work. (Eph 4:11-17 NIV)**

Let's begin with what we mean by "God's Work" and how we can participate in it. There are many, many aspects of God and his work, but here are three big ones I'd like to focus on this morning.

### God's Saving Work

**For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16)**

God is in the business of drawing people into a relationship with himself, and not just a distant acquaintance-level relationship. God desires so much more—a deep, intimate relationship, like that romantic relationship, where you're totally swept off your feet and you feel that the other person is the greatest thing that ever happened to you! But unlike other humans, God is actually the greatest thing that ever "happened" to you. And he desires a relationship that actually looks like that, where he comes first, is most important, and is treated the way he is worthy of being treated.

Now, of course, broken, twisted, and held captive by sin as we were, a rescue needed to happen a first, a saving! This saving was achieved at the cross, where the power of sin was broken.

We participate in this saving work of God by accepting this free gift.

Theologians and churches throughout history have argued and debated percentages. As we participate with God in this saving work, how much is God and how much is us? Is it 50/50? Does God just make the gift available, and the rest is 100% us? Do we even participate at all, or is it just 100% God all the way?

The key issues are:

Anything less than 100% from God gives us way too much credit. It easily leads to intense pressure to perform and incredible anxiety because it's all "on us."

Anything less than 100% on our part makes it hard to stomach people being held responsible for the choice they make, and easily leads to disengagement and even fatalism

I, personally, was set free in this area when I was presented with the idea that perhaps it doesn't need to be split like that. What if instead, it was actually 100% God and 100% us!

God, of course, has his hand and presence in and throughout every good thing in our lives and every good thing we do. So it is 100% God. But God does give us freedom to make choices, and honors those choices. He holds us responsible for those choices, so it is 100% us.

Now, is our 100% less than God's 100%? Most definitely. And doesn't 100% + 100% = 200%? Usually!

The truth is that in any relationship (if you're married you'll know this to be especially true, but it applies to siblings, friends, all other relationships, too), if each side is giving 50% in order to make 100%, you don't get a 100% awesome relationship. You get a 100% mediocre relationship! If the percentages are badly skewed (like one person's giving 90 and the other one's giving 10) then you run into some big problems.

But if both parties are giving a full 100% to the relationship, you get a 100% fantastic friendship, a 100% fantastic marriage, and (guess what?) a 100% fantastic relationship with God.

Trust me; I'm a math major!

God invites us to participate in his saving work on our behalf. If you've never accepted this invitation, God is calling you! He won't force you, and he won't do it for you. This is an invitation, not a demand. Oh, but it's a beautiful thing to accept this invitation—the joy, the peace, the wonder of actually being in relationship with the Maker of the Universe.

Once we accept the invitation, it's not over. Many people are concerned with punching their ticket to heaven, and that's all they want. But God wants far greater things for us.

### God's Sanctifying Work

God has given us his Holy Spirit, who is God himself, to dwell inside each one of us. One of the main purposes of this is to sanctify us, to make us holy. This makes sense; God's Spirit is not going to dwell in our hearts, right next to all the sin we have in there, and do nothing about it. By inviting God into our lives we have given him permission to sort out the junk we have in our hearts.

Here, too, we are invited to participate. The sanctifying process goes a lot faster if we participate. I think that's why the bible tells us to confess our sins. "Why?" you might ask. "God knows everything that we've ever done, it's not like you can hide from him. Why does he need us to confess our sins?"

But when was this ever about what God needs? That kind of thinking gets us messed up in so many ways. Are we really so firmly attached to the idea that we will only do something if God needs us to? Are we offended if he doesn't need us? "Nope. Sorry God, I don't need your charity. I'm not doing anything until you absolutely, definitely need me!" Oh wait, we do need God's charity, his generosity, his kindness. In fact, everything is predicated upon it. It is, after all, "the kindness of God that leads to repentance" (Romans 2:4).

When it comes to confession, sure God doesn't need to know the information, but it's not a fact-finding mission. As we participate, we are changed, and God's sanctifying work in our lives is driven forward. If confessing our sins is the negative side to being made holy, then seeking God is the positive side. The more we seek God, the more we seek to live lives that honor God, the more we will be sanctified and made holy, made more like Christ.

Why do we want this? Because, this is where life is found! And not only eternal life, but life experienced right now! God invites us to participate in His sanctifying work in our lives.

But, as Sanjay said last week during Freedom Sunday, God did not save us in order for us to just work on our own personal spirituality. God invites us to participate in his sending work.

## God's Sending Work

All the greatest sendings have been instigated by God.

God sent his Son into the world. God sent his Spirit into our hearts. God sent the disciples, the apostles (or sent ones), into the world to preach the good news of the sending of the Son and the sending of the Spirit; and so the church was birthed and built up. We stand on those foundations today!

At the end of Matthew, Jesus says to the disciples whom He is sending out:

**All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.** (Matt 28:18–20)

The apostles accepted this invitation, they participated with God as the good news spread and the early church was established.

Our God is a sending God! The church body is dynamic, active, and does not exist only on Sunday mornings, nor does it exist for the purpose of Sunday mornings. The church body exists for the glory of God. The church body exists wherever we are. Sunday services are not the end goal! The reason we gather is to be strengthened in our faith, encouraged in our walk, to worship God, and then to be sent back out to bring the good news into all the many and various arenas where God has placed us.

God invites us to participate in his sending work. That means that when we enter a situation, we acknowledge that God is already there and is already at work, rather than arrogantly assuming we've beaten God to the punch. It means that our attitude is to look for where God is already working, rather than trying to make something happen on our own. This doesn't mean that we can never do something new, but that even then, there will be stirrings, signs that God is preparing the way. This is a healthy way to work with God. This is participation!

Not only that, but God equips and empowers us for the task. He gives us gifts, what we often refer to as spiritual gifts. In our text for this morning from Ephesians 4, Paul mentions four gifts, but there are also three other passages where Paul mentions gifts (Romans 12, 1 Cor 12, and 1 Peter 4).

If you're sitting there feeling uncertain of the ways in which God has gifted you, or even completely in the dark, please do come talk to one of the pastors, especially if you want more clarity on the topic of spiritual gifts in general. It's also an excellent idea to ask a friend you can trust; often it's easier for those close to us to see how God has gifted us than it is to see it for ourselves!

The most important thing to note is that after each of the four lists of gifts, there is a passage on love. This is the purpose of the gifts: that we may better love God and love others. The gifts of the Spirit are not primarily for personal gain and definitely not for selfish use or putting ourselves above others. We are gifted to love by participating in God's work.

As Jesus sends His disciples out with the Great Commission, he ends with a promise: I am with you always. God will be with us every step of the way. It makes sense; participating with God means doing it with him. So many times, when we decide to do something for

God, it's exactly that—doing it for God. Our attitude is, "hey God, I've got this covered. You can go deal with something else now!" But that is not participation. And that's why so many of our Christian endeavors go so horribly wrong! We flip-flop between being too sure of ourselves, pridefully thinking that we can do it on our own, and being too unsure of ourselves, insecurely thinking that we somehow need to prove ourselves to God.

Let us be set free from these two terribly enslaving beliefs. "I am with you always" is a promise of success, even in the face of impossible odds. We need God with us, and he is delighted to work with us!

## Why is this one of our Family Values?

Because this all makes a huge difference as far as what your relationship with God looks like, not to mention how you live out your faith in the day to day where God has placed you Monday through Saturday! There is great freedom in accepting an invitation to participate, rather than fulfilling an obligatory duty.

We are just a small part of the much larger body of Christ worldwide, and as the leadership of PBCC we want to say yes to God's invitation to participate! We seek to mirror God's character in the way that we function. So what does this value look like here at PBCC?

## Participating at PBCC is a Free Invitation

No one checks up on you to make sure that you're pulling your weight. It's always easy to slip into a place where half of us are proud of "how much" we're doing, while the other half feel lesser for "not doing enough." We fight against that! You don't need to keep score of how much you're doing here to make sure that you measure up! Because, guess what? Participation in God's work is going to look different for different people, and in different seasons of our lives.

As someone with a very high sense of obligation and responsibility (which I blame on being the firstborn of seven!) and a correspondingly low level of patience with myself, when I think I'm not doing enough, I find this particularly difficult to live out. My natural state is flip-flopping between an "I've got it covered, God" confidence and an "I can never do enough" despair. My guess is that there's a lot of that sentiment among you all as well. I believe this is in large part because we have not truly understood this invitation to participate.

And so I am learning (slowly) to do things with God, to accept his invitation to participate. When I'm able to do this, the ministry is far greater, the participation actually builds up my relationship with God, and there is great freedom.

## Participating at PBCC is a Free Invitation to All

It's not just paid for "professionals". We don't believe that pastors should run every ministry, be at every event, or do all the "important work".

So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

Pastors responsibility is to equip; congregants responsibility is to participate. (If you don't feel like you're being equipped here at PBCC, please, please, please come talk to one of the pastors—this is our responsibility!) All of us are given spiritual gifts. The purpose of spiritual gifts is love, and the purpose of this equipping is to build up the body. None of us are perfect, but all of us are gifted!

How does participating build up the body of Christ? Firstly, if more of us are involved and participating, there is that much more potential

for building up. But secondly, participation does something in and to us. It builds up our relationship with God and it builds up our relationship with those with whom we are participating in God's work.

A great example of this is Children's Ministry. Bunnie is always talking about how she, and many other teachers, have signed up somewhat reluctantly (and with a lot of trepidation) to be Sunday School teachers. Yet they have ended up staying and loving it because of the relationships built with both kids and fellow teachers.

We do not fill our Sunday School with paid teachers. We do not fill our music teams with paid musicians. We do not fill all of our ministry leadership spots with paid leaders. We believe in participation in God's Work by all for the building up of all of the body of Christ.

You might have noticed that Sunday School is not open this Sunday. This is because we need seventeen more participants! This is an opportunity for you to participate, and I really mean that! We don't want you to do it just because you should. Don't do it because there's a number up on the screen of teachers needed. Don't do it if your heart's not in it. But also, don't not do it because you're not open to it.

My generation of parents, I need to speak to you for a second. 70% of our Sunday School teachers are not parents. It's great that we've made so much progress in this area over the years. But you know where the massive hole is? It's us! We're getting nearly zero participation from our generation of parents.

Now listen, I know that parenting is tough. I know that Bay Area life is tough. I know that most of our families have both parents working. And I know that we all want a break when we come to church. Additionally, I know that culturally we're all used to paying a professional to do what we are not specifically trained to do. I mean, I'm the handiest person that I know in my generation, and that is quite frankly terrifying!

But the thing is, you don't have to be a professional teacher to be a Sunday School teacher. You don't have to be an expert, you just have to show up with a heart for these kids and a desire to help them grow a little bit closer to Jesus. We are responsible for raising our children and for giving godly input to the children in our community. We want others to do this for our children, so perhaps we should consider doing this too!

I know we don't really want to do one more thing, but there is great joy to be found in participating in God's work! And while it's easy to become isolated and stuck at home with young kids, here is a way to get to know other families, to build relationships, and to help your kids with their faith later on.

Yes, that's right—you've probably heard us talk over the last few years about how important it is for church teens to have five adults involved in their lives, not their parents and not their youth pastor. What better way to do this than to have church families that you're close to, perhaps families with kids of a similar age to yours who you met by participating as a Sunday School teacher!

My generation of parents, I would ask that you at least be open to seeing if God is inviting you to participate in this way. This is just one of many ways to get involved and participate. "For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." (Eph 2:10)

Originally, I had thought to have a list of ways to participate at PBCC (the "good works" we could do) but then I decided it would be better to focus on the motivation to participate, because when we have the correct motivation, everything else falls into place.

That said, it is true that one of the downsides of all this is that one can be left aimlessly drifting if you're expecting someone to "give you a job!" So if you are uncertain of how to get involved here at PBCC, I would encourage you to talk to our Community Life pastor, Andy Drake. He'll be able to get you connected and plugged in and using your gifts.

I have to tell you, I love this Family Value! I enjoy the many ways in which I participate in God's work at PBCC. It has been a source of healing after my experience in Durham, and it has undone some of the bad habits I learned in that pressurized church environment. I love that in doing God's work we choose people over programs, and that as far as possible, we prioritize relationships over everything else. I love that our motivation is to be authentic, to hear people's stories, to know and to be known by each other as we participate together in Knowing Jesus and making him known.

One way in which we all participate is in our worship service. While it is easy for church services to become a spectator sport, where everyone on stage does all the work and the audience is entertained, that is neither biblical nor what we desire for you at PBCC. And nowhere is that more true than at the communion table, where we participate together in the meal that our savior has provided.

*We send you out into all the arenas where God has placed you  
May you accept God's Invitation to Participation  
Go in the Love of the Father  
The Grace of the Son  
And the Power of the Spirit  
Amen*

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