

From Attending to Participating

Scripture: Philippians 2:1-13

September 27, 2026 - Week 4 of Sermon Series: *"Alive Together"*

Theme: "I AM PARTICIPATING." - God has given me something to do.

Key Sentence: *God has not called us merely to attend the church, but to take our place in the life and ministry of the Body of Christ.*

Grace and peace to you in the name of God our Father, our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, today we come to the final Sunday of our September sermon series, "Alive Together: Showing Up for Christ and for One Another." Throughout this month, we have been walking through four simple declarations, and each one has invited us to take another step in our life together as the Body of Christ.

On the first Sunday, we said, "I AM PRESENT." We remembered that our presence matters because Christ is present when his people gather. On the second Sunday, we said, "I AM GROWING." We remembered that God does not call us to grow alone. We draw near to God, hold fast to hope, and encourage one another in Christian community.

Last Sunday, while I was away in Chicago for continuing education, I was not able to personally preach the third message in this series: "I AM INFLUENCING." But that truth still belongs to our journey. Whether we realize it or not, our lives influence others. Our words, priorities, presence, service, and example communicate something about what we believe matters.

And today we come to the final declaration: "I AM PARTICIPATING." This may be where the whole series has been leading us. Being present is important. Growing is important. Influencing others faithfully is important. But eventually our faith must move into action. Eventually we move from simply saying, "I attend this church," to saying, "I have a part in the ministry of this church."

There is a difference between attending and participating. A spectator attends. A disciple participates. A customer asks, "What am I receiving?" A disciple also asks, "What can I contribute?" A spectator watches ministry happen. A participant says, "God has given me something to do."

Philippians 2 speaks powerfully to this movement. Paul writes about unity, humility, the example of Jesus Christ, and then says, "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who is at work in you." God is at work in us. And because God is at work in us, God also works through us.

So today I would like us to reflect on three movements:

First, Participation Begins with the Mind of Christ

Second, Participation Means Taking Our Place in the Body

Third, God Works in Us So That God Can Work Through Us

The key sentence for today is this:

"God has not called us merely to attend the church, but to take our place in the life and ministry of the Body of Christ."

First, Participation Begins with the Mind of Christ

Paul begins Philippians 2 by speaking about relationships inside the Christian community. He says, "Be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind." Then he says, "Do nothing from selfish ambition or empty conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves." Before Paul tells the church what to do, he speaks about the kind of heart they need.

That is important because Christian participation is not simply, "Everybody needs a job." It is not, "We have vacancies on committees, so somebody must fill them." It is not merely, "The church needs more volunteers." Christian participation begins much deeper than that. It begins with the mind of Christ.

Paul says, "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus." What kind of mind was in Jesus? A mind willing to serve. A heart willing to humble himself. A life willing to put the needs of others ahead of personal comfort. Jesus did not ask, "What is easiest for me?" Jesus asked, "What does love require?"

Paul reminds us that Christ did not cling to privilege. He emptied himself, took the form of a servant, humbled himself, and became obedient even to the point of death on a cross. That is the pattern behind Christian participation. Before we ask, "What ministry should I do?" we first ask, "Am I becoming willing to serve?"

"Participation without humility becomes control. Participation with the mind of Christ becomes ministry."

A church can have many busy people and still not have Christlike participation. We can serve because we want recognition. We can lead because we want control. We can volunteer because we want things done our way. We can join a committee and still resist the mind of Christ. Paul says true Christian service begins with humility.

Sometimes I participate by leading. Sometimes I participate by following. Sometimes I speak. Sometimes I listen. Sometimes my idea is chosen. Sometimes another person has the better idea. Sometimes participation means saying, "This is not about me. This is about Christ and his church."

Paul continues, "Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others." Imagine what could happen if we carried that sentence into every part of church life. Instead of asking only, "What will I receive today?" we also ask, "Whose needs can I notice today?" Instead of asking only, "Did I like the music?" we ask, "Did I help someone worship?" Instead of asking only, "Does this ministry meet my needs?" we ask, "Who might need me to help this ministry happen?"

Instead of asking only, "Does the church care about me?" Christian participation also asks, "Whom is Christ asking me to care about?" That is the movement from attending to participating. We begin to look beyond ourselves and see the people, needs, and opportunities God has placed around us.

"The mind of Christ turns the question from, 'What do I want?' to, 'How can I serve?'"

Second, Participation Means Taking Our Place in the Body

One of the easiest ways to think about church is to imagine that ministry is something certain people do. The pastor preaches. The musician plays. The elder leads. The deacon cares. The Sunday school teacher teaches. And everyone else attends. But that is not the New Testament picture of the church.

The New Testament describes the church as a body. A body is alive because all its members have a part. A hand has a part. A foot has a part. An eye has a part. An ear has a part. Different functions. Different gifts. Different responsibilities. But one body. There are no meaningless members in the Body of Christ.

You may not preach, but perhaps you encourage. You may not sing in the choir, but perhaps you pray faithfully. You may not lead Session, but perhaps you notice the visitor nobody else noticed. You may not teach a class, but perhaps you have decades of wisdom that a younger Christian desperately needs.

You may not be physically able to do what you once did, but perhaps your prayers have become one of the most important ministries in the congregation. You may be young and think, "What can I contribute?" You have gifts. You have energy. You have questions. You have ideas. You have a voice. You have a place. You may be older and think, "My season of usefulness has passed." No. Your ministry may change, but your place in the Body of Christ remains.

"Every member matters, and every member has something to offer."

Sometimes our language reveals whether we think like spectators or participants. We say, "Why don't they do this?" "They should fix that." "They should start this ministry." But who are "they"? The church is not some mysterious group somewhere else. We are the church.

If we say, "They should welcome visitors," perhaps the Spirit is asking, "Could you welcome them?" If we say, "They should care for our young people," perhaps God is asking, "Could you learn their names? Could you encourage them?" If we say, "They should visit the homebound," perhaps Christ is asking, "Could you make a call or a visit?" If we say, "They should invite people to church," perhaps Jesus is asking, "Who could you invite?"

There is a spiritual shift when the church moves from "They should" to "How can we?" And then from "How can we?" to "What can I do?"

"They should." becomes "How can we?" and finally, "What can I do?"

That is participation. It does not mean that one person must do everything. No Christian is called to do everything. In fact, the body has many members precisely because no single member can do it all. Healthy participation means discerning, "What is my part?"

What gifts has God given me? What experience has God given me? What needs touch my heart? Where do I sense joy when I serve? Where are other people already recognizing gifts in me? What season of life am I in? What can I faithfully offer?

Maybe your part is worship leadership. Maybe it is hospitality. Maybe it is teaching children. Maybe it is youth ministry. Maybe it is music, stewardship, property care, mission, visiting, prayer, cooking, administration, technology, transportation, or simply being the person who notices when somebody has disappeared for several Sundays and calls them.

The goal is not for everyone to do the same thing. The goal is for everyone to discover their part. The Body of Christ is strongest not when a few people do everything, but when many people faithfully offer what God has given them.

Third, God Works in Us So That God Can Work Through Us

Near the end of our passage Paul says, "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling." Then immediately he adds, "for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure." There is a beautiful partnership here.

Paul does not say, "Sit back and do nothing because God will do everything." But neither does Paul say, "Everything depends on you." He says that God is at work in us. Therefore, we participate. God gives grace, and we respond. God gives gifts, and we use them. God gives opportunities, and we step into them. God gives strength, and we serve. God gives compassion, and we care.

God gives wisdom, and we share it. God gives forgiveness, and we practice reconciliation. God gives the gospel, and we bear witness. Christian participation is never merely human effort. The deepest question is not, "What can I accomplish for God?" It is, "What does God want to accomplish through me?"

"God is at work in us so that God can work through us."

Sometimes Christians say, "I do not have any special gifts." But if you belong to Christ, the Spirit of God is at work in you. Perhaps you do not have the gift someone else has. That is fine. The church does not need twenty pastors. It does not need everyone playing the organ. It does not need everyone chairing a committee. The church needs the gifts God has actually distributed among its people.

Your gift may seem ordinary to you because you have carried it for years. Perhaps hospitality feels natural. Perhaps listening comes easily. Perhaps organizing comes easily. Perhaps fixing things comes easily. Perhaps children trust you. Perhaps you have compassion for people who are grieving. Perhaps you can explain Scripture simply. Perhaps you notice needs other people overlook. Perhaps you are generous. Perhaps you are the person who follows through when you say, "I will do it."

"The Body of Christ needs ordinary gifts offered faithfully to an extraordinary God."

Do not underestimate those gifts. Many of the ministries that hold a congregation together do not happen in front of the sanctuary. They happen in kitchens, offices, hospital rooms, nursing homes, parking lots, classrooms, fellowship halls, homes, phone calls, emails, rides, meals, prayers, and quiet acts of care.

Philippians 2 also reminds us that Jesus did not love humanity from a distance. He entered our world. He took flesh. He served. He obeyed. He gave himself. The gospel is full of participation. God did not merely watch our need. God entered it. And now Christ calls his church to do the same.

The church cannot fulfill its mission from the sidelines. We cannot love our neighbors only in theory. We cannot care for children only in theory. We cannot welcome strangers only in theory. We cannot serve the community only in theory. We cannot share the good news only in theory. At some point faith says, "Here I am. How can I help?"

"At some point faith moves from, 'Someone should do something,' to, 'Here I am, Lord. Use me.'"

Our September Journey

Church, look at the journey we have taken this month. First: "I AM PRESENT." I recognize that my presence matters. Then: "I AM GROWING." I allow Christ to continue forming me. Then: "I AM INFLUENCING." I recognize that the way I live affects others. And finally: "I AM PARTICIPATING." I take my place in the Body of Christ.

These are not four disconnected sermons. They belong together. If I am never present, it becomes difficult to participate. When I am present, I have opportunities to grow. As I grow, my life influences others. And as I recognize my influence and gifts, I begin to participate more intentionally in Christ's ministry.

"Presence leads to formation. Formation shapes influence. Influence moves into participation."

So perhaps the final question of this sermon series is very simple: "What is my part?" Not, "What should everybody else do?" but, "What is my part?" Not, "What is the pastor supposed to do?" but, "What has God entrusted to me?" Not only, "What does this church need?" but, "Where might God be inviting me personally to participate?"

Perhaps God is calling you to become more faithful in worship. Perhaps to join a ministry. Perhaps to mentor a young person. Perhaps to serve as an elder or deacon in the future. Perhaps to visit someone. Perhaps to welcome newcomers. Perhaps to sing. Perhaps to help with children. Perhaps to pray. Perhaps to give. Perhaps to invite someone. Perhaps simply to tell one of our ministry leaders, "I am available. Where can I help?"

"I am available. Where can I help?" can become a holy sentence in the life of a congregation.

Conclusion - I Am Participating

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, our September journey concludes today, but the life these words describe should continue long after September ends. We began with "I AM PRESENT." My presence matters. Then "I AM GROWING." God is still forming me. Then "I AM INFLUENCING." My example influences others. And today: "I AM PARTICIPATING." God has given me something to do.

The church does not need more spectators. The church needs disciples. Disciples who worship. Disciples who learn. Disciples who pray. Disciples who encourage. Disciples who welcome. Disciples who serve. Disciples who forgive. Disciples who give. Disciples who use their gifts. Disciples who can say, "Here I am, Lord. Use me."

And remember we do not participate because everything depends upon us. Paul gives us the good news: "For it is God who is at work in you." God is already working. God is working in this congregation. God is working in our children and youth. God is working in our older members. God is working in our leaders. God is working in newcomers. God is working in people who have belonged to this church for decades. God is working in you. And God is working in me.

Our calling is to respond. Instead of saying, "Someone should do something," perhaps we can begin saying, "Lord, what would you have me do?" Instead of "They should," we say, "How can we?" And finally, "How can I?"

Because we do not simply come to church. We are the church. We do not simply attend ministry. We share in ministry. We do not simply watch the Body of Christ. We are the Body of Christ.

So church, carry the whole September journey with you: "I AM PRESENT. I AM GROWING. I AM INFLUENCING. I AM PARTICIPATING." Let these not remain four sermon titles. Let them become a way of life.

"I AM PRESENT. I AM GROWING. I AM INFLUENCING. I AM PARTICIPATING."

May Christ give us his mind so that we serve humbly. May the Holy Spirit help each of us discover our place. May God work in us and through us for the good of this congregation, our community, and the world. And together, may we continue to be the Body of Christ - ALIVE TOGETHER.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Reference Notes

1. The Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition, Philippians 2:1-13; 1 Corinthians 12:12-27; Mark 10:42-45.
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4. Frank Thielman, Philippians, NIV Application Commentary. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995, reflections on Christlike humility and congregational life.
5. Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Book of Order 2025-2027, F-1.0301-F-1.0304, on the church as the Body of Christ and its calling to worship, witness, and service.