Above all, trust in the slow work of God.

I lifted that line from the twentieth century French Jesuit priest and paleontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. If you spend your life looking at fossils, you might take a long view of things, even divine things. And in fact, Teilhard, gave us a remarkable view of how God works through evolution across long eons to bring about God’s desired will for creation.

The slow work of God. God’s work is normally slow, patient and deliberate. Teilhard continues: *We are quite naturally impatient in everything to reach the end without delay. We should like to skip the intermediate stages. We are impatient of being on the way to something unknown, something new. And yet it is the law of all progress that it is made by passing through some stages of instability—and that it may take a very long time.*

Take our COVID-19 pandemic right now. Please. Take it. Take it away. See what he means? We are impatient to reach the end without delay. We want to skip the intermediate stages. We want to declare that it will all disappear, and we can get back to normal life in no time. But we are learning that some things—even if they are fast-tracked, like the search for a vaccine—can’t be rushed.

Yet, even in Teilhard’s theory that emphasizes the slowness of things in the way they develop naturally, there are breakthrough moments. Leaps from one thing to the next when you get insight into where things are heading. Miracles are like that. We view them in the moment as exceptional, a suspension of the laws of nature. But through the eyes of faith, you may see them as signs.

The word for miracle in Hebrew is *nes*. It’s meaning is similar to one of the Greek words for miracle, *semeion*, meaning sign. In both cases, the word itself

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1 https://us4.campaign-archive.com/?e=646146a867&u=838944ee48d7a9d35dcce6d60&id=3aaa6bf686
points us beyond the thing itself to something else.

A miracle is in itself wonderful. Full of wonder. We’ll be looking at three passages in the next weeks from Matthew’s Gospel that include miracles. These come right after the teaching ministry of Jesus in Matthew. It’s like the game of Show and Tell, but in reverse. Jesus tells us how things are supposed to be, what the divine will for creation is despite how the world looks at the moment. Then he shows us. And the way he shows us is by performing miracles as signs of the new creation God is bringing about.

I am calling this story today the miracle of abundance because of the multiplication of a few loaves and fish for the 5,000 men, not counting women and children. Just to be clear, women and children counted, even back then, don’t you know?! But they didn’t count them for reasons only the legacy of patriarchy can explain. At the risk of digressing, here is an example of how Christianity even back then nods to the culture by counting only the men, but then usurps it by adding that there were women and children, too. It’s another way to show that while God works slowly most of the time, God’s work points to something grander to come.

And that’s where we go next. Miracles are signs of God’s new creation in the midst of the old. They are moments when time is fast-forwarded; we get a glimpse of what is going to be universally true one day but is only seen now as an exception to the rule.

There are actually two miracles taking place in this text. The first is Jesus healing people, and the second is Jesus feeding people. Hurting people are healed and hungry people are fed. People who are deprived of access to healthcare and healthy food get both from the hand of Jesus.

We are more aware than ever during this pandemic of the inequities in access to healthcare—not to mention health outcomes—and to healthy food. While we have had a massive lack of COVID-19 testing available nationwide, we also know that the tests we have had available are more available in the wealthier parts of our cities and more affordable to them. Think about this: tests have been less available and affordable for essential workers who are risking their health and
that of their families just because of their economic status. We know that the lack of fresh produce throughout southern Dallas, as well as financial insecurity and lack of public safety also result in more hypertension, heart disease and diabetes. Which leads to this: Black and Latinx Americans are dying at 3-4 times the rate of white Americans, mainly because they are poorer. Should demography be destiny? Should the zip code you are born into through no merit or fault of your own determine your life expectancy. Two miles difference between southern and northern Dallas can yield as much as 26 years difference in the life expectancy of men.

This is the way things are in Dallas today. Nothing says they have to stay this way. This is the way things were in the Galilee where the people who gathered to hear Jesus teach and seek healing from their diseases had far less opportunity for wellness than those who lived just a few miles away in towns like Sepphoris, or certainly Jerusalem.

Jesus did not view the people who lived in the poorer parts of Palestine as less deserving of abundant life than those who lived in the richer parts. His healing and feeding miracles enact the prayer he taught—the one we prayed together a little earlier—that God’s kingdom come, God’s will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Oh, and that God would give us this day our daily bread.

C. S. Lewis talked about miracles as nature sped up. It is not the suspension of nature but the completion of it that we see in a miracle. What we know through laws and general principles, Lewis says, is a series of connections. But in order for there to be a real universe the connections must be given something to connect to.²

Miracles challenge us to believe that there is more going on in the world than meets the eye. That God is going on in the world. That creation is yearning for its deliverance from scarcity. That it wants to come into its God-ordained abundance.

In these miracles of abundance,
Jesus unlocks the gates that keep creation from its wholeness. He knocks down the barriers that keep creatures from experiencing the abundant life he promises. He opens up our imagination to see what is possible beyond our present moments of distress.

But Jesus doesn’t do these things alone. He uses what already is all around us and he uses us. The disciples saw the problem of the people’s hunger and the lack of food and thought Jesus should send them away. This isn’t callous counsel; it’s compassionate concern. Send them away so they can get something to eat in the villages. But wherever Jesus is, there is life. There is enough. Communion might just break out at any moment.

Jesus asks the disciples if they have done any asset mapping. Yes, they have five loaves and two fish. *Nothing but five loaves and two fish*, is actually what they say. Not enough, they think. Jesus sees the much in the little, the more in the less, the abundant in the scant. He tells the disciples—the church, us—to give them something to eat. And when they do, everyone eats. With leftovers, too. Twelve baskets, one for each disciple.

Wonder who fed Jesus with his?

What we see in this story is that contrary to our usual way of seeing, we don’t really have a supply problem of anything; we have a distribution problem. Everyone could have healthcare in our country if we want to distribute it that way. Everyone could have enough good food to eat if we want to distribute it that way.

But we think we have a better idea. Make everything a privilege. Trust that those who have more than enough have gotten it because God blessed them specially for their good values and hard work. Then call on them to share what they have with the needy, who will be reminded by this charity that they are among those whom God has judged less worthy. But does that sound like Jesus to you?

Charity is a good thing, as far as it goes. But it never goes far enough to get us to communion. It always leaves some feeling proud of themselves for what they have and what they have shared, and others feeling ashamed for what they don’t have and what they have had to receive in charity. Wouldn’t it be
better to work toward a world with less inequality and more common dignity? Wouldn’t it be better to work backward from our vision of heaven to earth instead of the other way around?

The 1984 movie *Places in the Heart* portrays life in Waxahachie, Texas, during the Great Depression. It’s timeless, though. Actually, it’s timely.

The final scene is church at its best. The people are gathered for worship. The preacher reads from 1 Corinthians 13 about how love never ends. The choir begins to sign “In the Garden.” The plates are passed for communion, first the bread and then the cup. But the camera homes in on the bread and wine as each person receives it individually. And then you see it—you see what’s really going on. The living are joined by the dead. The Black man beaten and run out of town by the Klan is there taking communion next to the blind man. The policeman is sitting next to the young Black boy who accidentally shot him dead, leaving his widow and two children to scrape things together. The philandering husband and his wife are there, reconciled.

Everybody eats together. Everybody. There is enough. Enough for the living. Enough for the dead. It’s a fast-forward glimpse of heaven.

That’s what church is, I tell you—a miracle of abundance. Amen.