To my mind, Paulus’ theory takes a lot of the impact out of the story. But I will concede that many of us have trouble reconciling miracles with reason. Our first thought is to find some logical explanation for the event. We view with skepticism any “miracle” that is not accompanied by flashes of light or angelic messengers or unexplainable acts of nature. We think miracles require an element of shock and awe, something more than fish and bread.

But our natural skepticism misses the real story. Chastity’s texts helped Brad deal with his grief following his daughter’s death. Brad’s reply to Chastity helped her put to rest her grief over Ligons’ death. Both Chastity and Brad viewed the texts from the other as conveying a healing message from God. In Matthew’s account, the real story is that Jesus provided food for over 5,000 people using simply what he had on hand.

Miracle stories like the feeding of the 5,000 and stories like Chastity’s invite us to think about how God works in our lives. Certainly, God is not limited to interventions that we can explain with science. God can work through means we might label as coincidence or accident or serendipity or luck or natural processes or simply ordinary, everyday events. Unfortunately, when God works through the commonplace things of life, we are quick to downplay them and apt to miss what God is really doing.

Through Isaiah, God says, “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways...For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (55:8-9). These words emphasize how God can work through means that we humans do not have available to us, and that is certainly a correct message to hear in these verses.

But we should not mistake these words to mean that God works only through extraordinary or miraculous means. God can and does operate through everyday things. Scripture shows that God uses conventional means (people, events, tools) much more often than God intervenes by changing the laws of nature or sending angelic messengers. This in no way diminishes the majesty of God's ways. We might say that in sending Jesus as a human being, God put God’s majesty in an ordinary, everyday “container” to which we could easily relate.

Consider this true story from a book called Small Miracles: Carol Anderson was young widow. Bob Edwards was a young widower. Both had happy marriages, but after several lonely years they met and got married. They got along well except for one thing: Bob wanted to share the good memories of his first wife with Carol, but Carol did not want to talk at all about their previous husband because the pain of his loss was still too strong.

After a few years, Carol felt secure enough to talk about the past. She showed Bob a photo of herself and her first husband from her honeymoon in France. “Here we are at Lourdes,” Carol said, pointing to a photo taken at the famous healing shrine. “You went to Lourdes?” Bob said, mildly interested. “So, did we.” Then Bob asked to see the photo again. “Who’s that couple in the background?” “I have no idea,” Carol said. “Just a couple who walked by and were caught by the shutter.” That couple turned out to be Bob and his first wife! You can call it a coincidence or a “God-instance,” but you must admit that it seems miraculous.

What we affirm today is that God works in mysterious ways, through the extraordinary and unexplainable, and through the commonplace and conventional things in life. What matters is how we interpret the things happening around us. If we experience God as being in them, we are in touch with the divine Spirit of God, the miraculous.

Two weeks ago, I was feeling down, feeling lonely and dejected with my work, unable to minister to people in person. I stepped outside to change the Burma-shave-style signs we put up to offer hope and grace and humor to the community. A woman drove up, slowed down, and yelled out her window, “I love your signs!” Well, that was nice of her, but I did not think much of the interaction. Then another car went by and the driver honked his horn and waved. Then a third car went by and the driver honked her horn and waved. I knew none of those people, but God arranged for them to drive by at the exact time I was changing the signs. Their affirmation lifted my spirits. God knew what I needed that day and God used three strangers as agents of God’s grace. Was it a miracle? I think so. In fact, anytime God works in our lives, it is miraculous.

We encounter many serendipitous happenings in life for which there is no logical explanation. When something occurs that is extra-ordinary, decidedly unusual, and not what we normally expect, perhaps we should consider it an “act of God” and look for the grace in it before we dismiss it out of hand. Perhaps God chooses to work miracles through people or events that seem utterly ordinary at first. Maybe that is God’s point: God can work through everyone and everything to accomplish God’s purpose.

In the case of Chastity and Brad, the miracle may be that God moved both toward the mutual support and benefit that occurred. In the case of Bob and Carol, the miracle may be that the intersection of their former lives deepened their new life together. For me, the miracle may be that the reminder that a small task may have a great impact in the community. For the 5,000+ people in our reading, the miracle may be a free lunch, or a generous community spirit, or an encounter with the Living God who makes the common things uncommonly good, the ordinary extraordinary, and the familiar things holy.

Prayer: Merciful God we praise you for your unfailing love. We praise you for feeding our hunger for bread and for “the bread of life.” We praise you for taking our little basket of fish and barley loaves and using it to feed others. We thank you for your daily tender mercies. We thank you for your daily love. We thank you for your daily grace. We call upon you, Lord, to empower us as we declare who you are to a world who needs you. We call upon you, Lord, to inspire to see the miracles you perform all around us everyday. We ask all this in your son’s name, Amen.

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**Start Seeing Miracles**

Sunday, August 2, 2020 Matthew 14:13-21

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

For years, Chastity Patterson mourned the death of Jason Ligons, a man she considered a father-figure. After Ligons died, Chastity texted his phone every day to update him about her life. While she did not expect a response, the daily texting helped Chastity deal with her grief. In her message on the night before the fourth anniversary of Ligons’ death, Chastity texted how she had beaten cancer and about falling in love and having her heart broken.

Then, unexpectedly, Chastity received a response, not from Ligons, of course, but from a man identified only as Brad. “I am not your father,” Brad texted, “but I have been getting all your messages for the past four years....I lost my daughter in a car wreck (in) August 2014 and your messages have kept me alive,” Brad said. “When you text me, I know it’s a message from God.” Chastity posted the exchange on Facebook, saying, “Today was my sign that everything is okay, and I can let him [Ligons] rest!” After Chastity’s story went viral, she posted “that there is a God and it might take four years, but he shows up right on time!”

While Chastity and Brad consider this a texting miracle, not everyone who responded to her posts agreed. Miracles are challenging to quantify and difficult to comprehend. Which brings us to the Scripture lesson for today: the well-known account of Jesus feeding more than 5,000 people with five loaves of bread and two fish and ending up with 12 baskets of leftovers. This story appears in all four gospels, a sure indication that the early Christians had no doubt that what Jesus did that day was a miracle.

The 19th century Bible scholar Heinrich Paulus viewed miracles with skepticism. He examined the feeding of the 5,000 story and theorized that in the spirit of the day, the people who arrived with packed picnic baskets shared their food with those who had none. The real miracle, says Paulus, is that the “haves” shared what they had with “have nots.”