

Two weeks ago a new television show debuted. It is titled God Friended Me. In the pilot episode a young man named Miles received a Facebook friend request from someone claiming to be God. Since Miles is an atheist, he declined the request several times before relenting and adding “God” to his friend list. As soon as he did so, God began suggesting other people for Miles to friend. Each person had a need, or led Miles into a new adventure. And in each new adventure, unexplainable and mysterious things happened that made Miles wonder if maybe there really is a God who has a plan for us, and if we really are all part of some grand design.

In the pilot episode, for instance, Miles was trying to track down the person behind what he began calling “the God account,” as he didn’t believe it was God that had friended him. To do that, he enlisted the help of a real friend named Rakesh. When Rakesh hacked into the account, he told Miles that he discovered computer software code he’d never seen before. When Miles asked him to clarify what he was saying, Rakesh explained that it was so sophisticated that “*there’s only a small pool of people on the planet who could have written something like this.*”

He then added that this kind of computer software code is called “predictive analytics.” Predictive analytics is the kind of artificial intelligence software code used in robots because it can predict behavior. Referring to how Miles had just saved a man from committing suicide because God had suggested Miles friend him, Rakesh then said he didn’t think it had been a set up (with the man only pretending to be suicidal),. He said that because the computer software code he was looking at implied “*there’s a good chance that man really was going to jump.*” “*Even if what you’re saying is true,*” Miles said, “*there’s no way they could have known I would step in to save him.*” “*Unless that’s the point,*” Rakesh said, “*TO SEE IF YOU WOULD.*”

When it comes to real life, God doesn’t friend us, and suggest we friend other people, just to SEE if we might reach out in Personal Ministry. God friends us, and suggests we friend other people, so we WILL reach out in acts of Personal Ministry. We heard that in a video we watched a few minutes ago. In that video, Gloria spoke about a time when she was invited to enter into the Personal Ministry task of praying for a loved one. In that moment, God was not testing her TO SEE if she would engage in the Personal Ministry task of prayer, but actually inviting her to do so in order to make a difference in someone’s life.

As a result of her prayers, and the prayers of others, that loved one not only survived, but recovered in miraculous ways. If we have been a Christian very long such a story is not breaking news. We have heard of people doing the things that Christ tells us to do, and have seen people’s lives changed as a result. What may be breaking news, however, is understanding that Jesus commands us to do such things not only to make a difference in the lives of OTHER PEOPLE, but also so our lives might be changed as WE develop BIG FAITH through what we do.

We see this in the story of the Good Samaritan. In that story, Jesus responded to the question “*who is my neighbor?*” That question did not come out of the blue. In Leviticus 19, a person’s “*neighbor*” was said to be “*one of your people,*” a fellow Israelite. In the story of the Good Samaritan, Jesus was saying that everyone is our neighbor, not just those like us, those related to us, or those whose

behavior is approved of by us. This means that in calling us to Personal Ministry, God is saying we need to reach out in Great Commission love to EVERYONE, and not just those like us, those related to us, or those whose behavior is approved of by us.

This means that if we want to grow the BIG FAITH we need to become the kinds of people God created us to be, Republicans must be in Personal Ministry to Democrats, liberals must be in Personal Ministry to conservatives, and every one of us needs to be in Personal Ministry to everyone else God invites us to “friend” by bringing them into our lives.

The reason is that God isn’t interested in just having us meet the needs of other people. God also wants US to grow spiritually through what we do. He wants us to grow the BIG FAITH we need to withstand the temptations to go astray. He want us to grow the BIG FAITH we need to persevere in the battle against the Evil One. And He wants us to grow the BIG FAITH we need to not only notice His spiritual friend request popping up in our lives, but also respond to it in such a way that He cam make us into everything He envisioned us being when He first created us. We see this is the two passages of scripture that were read.

In Matthew, we heard about an incident in which thousands of people were miraculously fed. When we hear that story, we usually focus on the miracle. But this story also speaks to the topic of Personal Ministry. This is because when Jesus finally finished healing those who had been brought to Him, His disciples noticed that it was late in the afternoon. Since they were in the middle of nowhere, they suggested Jesus tell the crowd to go to the villages around them to get food. But Jesus replied, saying “*you give them something to eat.*” The disciples were probably shocked to hear those words. The crowd had been counted at “*about five thousand men, beside women and children.*” Which means there probably was at least ten thousand people present.

All the disciples could see as a possible resource was the dinner of one young boy. It consisted of “*five loaves of bread, and two fish.*” The loaves of bread were probably dinner roll size, and the fish were probably only a few inches long. When they showed Jesus the meager resources available, Jesus said “*bring them here to me.*” When we read that, we may picture the miracle happening right at that point, with the bread and fish miraculously multiplying while Jesus was giving thanks. But notice what Matthew specifically said about how things happened. Matthew said that after Jesus gave thanks, He gave the fish and loaves to the disciples, “*and the disciples gave them to the people.*” Then Matthew said “*they all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over.*”

Matthew doesn’t tell us when the multiplication took place! Instead of taking place when Jesus was giving thanks, it could have taken place AS the disciples were handing out bread and fish. Which I think was the case. The reason I think that is because Jesus was just as interested in meeting the spiritual needs of His disciples as He was about meeting the physical needs of the crowd. This is because He knew that Personal Ministry is one of the ways we grow BIG FAITH. Which I think is what happened as the disciples moved about with their “never getting to the bottom” baskets, and then - to put icing on the cake - collecting twelve baskets of leftovers.

In the passage from Acts, we see another story that at first doesn't seem to be about Personal Ministry, but actually does speak about it. One of the things the Church was doing in its earliest days was meeting the needs of people. As this was occurring, an issue rose up over whether Gentile widows were being cared for in the same way as Jewish widows. The apostles suggested that a group of Gentile men be selected to fix the problem. They did such a good job that what could have been a stain on the church's reputation led to a situation where "*the number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly.*" What isn't explicitly said in this short episode is how the Personal Ministry these seven men engaged in effected their own spiritual lives.

But we do know the spiritual growth story of one of them. Not long after engaging in this Personal Ministry, Stephen was said to be doing "*great wonders and miraculous signs among the people.*" In response, the religious establishment "*could not stand up against his wisdom or the Spirit by whom he spoke.*" But because they still wanted to shut down what he was saying about Jesus, they created a false accusation, put him through a rigged trial, and sentenced him to death for violating Jewish law. What this has to do with the topic of Personal Ministry isn't his dying as a martyr, however. The way this links with today's topic of Personal Ministry is how Stephen went from being one of seven men tasked with distributing food to widows to being on the priest's "Most Wanted" list. For it was only because he was willing to see God in what He had been asked to do that Stephen was enabled by God to spiritually grow to the point that he was said to be a man "*full of faith and of the Holy Spirit.*"

Acts of Personal Ministry are not easy however. Returning to the TV show God Friend Me, we see that when God sent Miles suggestions for new people to friend, Miles didn't want to say yes. Instead, he made excuses. And when he did finally do what God told him to do, it did not always go successfully. In fact, in the second episode, he tried to friend a person God told him to friend, and it was disastrous. It is no different with us. God always seems to be asking us to do more than we want to do, and more than we feel capable of doing. And when we say yes, it doesn't always result in grand things happening. In fact, sometimes it results in failure and creates more problems than we had before we said yes to God. And yet, when we take the risk of trying to develop BIG FAITH, and step out in trust that God will bless our efforts, He often turns blunders into victory, and limited capability into mountain moving achievement.

We see this in the second episode of God Friend Me. God sent Miles a suggestion for a new friend named Katie. Miles had Rakesh track her down, and he went to the restaurant where Katie worked. There he heard Katie's boss being nasty to her. Miles stepped in to help her, but his intervention got her fired. Through the events that unfolded, however, Miles got to be part of a miracle that had the potential to not only change Katie's life, but also the lives of numerous other people - including Katie's autistic son. I won't give away how all that happened, or what might happen in future episodes as a result, so you can watch - and think about it - it for yourself. I will say, however, that as I watched that second episode I remembered the many biblical figures that stumbled out of the gate, but went on to have God do great things through their willingness to engage Him through acts of Personal Ministry.

The same is true for you and I here today. You may have already found your calling in life. You may have already found the ways God has gifted you to be in Personal Ministry. If that is the case, then ask God for the BIG FAITH to keep doing what you're doing, and to go deeper and wider in doing it. If you haven't found your calling yet, it's not too late. Or if God is telling you this morning that there is something new He wants you to do, He will help you step out in BIG FAITH to respond.

For that reason, there is therefore an insert in your bulletin again this week. It has 7 questions listed on it, one for each day of this next week. On each day of this next week, I therefore invite you to read the listed question, and ponder it. Then speak to God about it in prayer. At the end of the week, read the paragraph at the bottom of the insert, and ponder the questions in the two bullet points. Then speak to God about them. As you speak to God, ask Him if there is a Personal Ministry you are participating in already where He wants you to go "deeper or wider," or if there is a new Personal Ministry He would like you to add to what you are currently doing. For the answer to those questions might just change your life, sending you off in a direction you may never have imagined, BUT which may change your life in positive and joy-filled ways.

One person who stepped up at one point in her life to respond to God's friend request, and God's suggestion to friend someone else through acts of Personal Ministry, was Beth Rozek. We're now going to hear her share what happened when she stepped out in BIG FAITH to do so, and how that act of obedience affected not only her faith, but also had the potential to affect the lives - and the faith - of other people.