

Three weeks ago a TV show titled God Friended Me debuted. In the first episode, a young man named Miles received a Facebook friend request from someone claiming to be God. As soon as Miles added God to his friends list, God suggested another person for Miles to friend. In the second episode, God suggested an additional person for Miles to friend. Each of the persons God suggested had a need. Each need led Miles into a new adventure. And each new adventure led to unexplainable and mysterious things happening that made Miles wonder if there really is a God who has a plan for us, and if we really are all part of some grand design.

The third episode began differently. This time God “liked” the web site of a business named “Heavenly Taco Truck.” For those of you who don’t use Facebook, “liking” is an online way to express approval or support for something. So Miles visited the “Heavenly Taco Truck” to see if he could figure out its link to what he was calling “the God account,” since he was an atheist and didn’t believe that it was actually God behind the Facebook postings. As Miles ate tacos and looked for clues, a boy stole his wallet. Miles chased him, but he got away.

Miles concluded this wasn’t a coincidence. Then he received another friend suggestion. This one was for a man named Ray Nicolette. Ray was a detective. Miles concluded this wasn’t a coincidence either. And he was right. It turned out there was a reason, a plan, a grand design, for what had happened. I won’t give away what happened, or what might happen in future episodes, so you can watch - and think about it - for yourself. I will say however that it is not just in TV shows that God works through other people to try to grow BIG FAITH in us.

On Mother’s Day of 2014, Sandy and I left Jonestown, traveled east on the Turnpike, and exited at Bensalem. As we traveled north on Route 1, my memory floated back to the 1980’s. I was a student at Messiah College at the time, and had a classmate who lived in Newtown. Because of that, I had traveled that same route numerous times to visit. As I remembered those trips, I felt God telling me I was ‘coming home’ to a place I had been before (but actually hadn’t), and - more importantly - that everything was going to turn out alright. The reason that message of comfort was important was that Sandy and I were nervously on our way to meet with the Staff Parish Committee as the first step in Bishop Johnson appointing me here.

The seeming ‘coincidence’ of relationship links didn’t stop there, however. Once I arrived, I learned that David Ryan had been one of your pastors. With over four hundred clergy in the conference, we typically don’t know the pastors we follow at a church - especially when they served many years before. But I knew David. And I knew David because I first knew his wife Jeanette. Jeanette had been a friend of the person I visited in Newtown. Shortly after arriving here, I sat down to talk with Pastor Stott. As Ron and I talked, he mentioned someone named Norm Leavy. Norm had been the pastor of my college friend’s church back in the 1980’s. But since he left the denomination decades ago, it was intriguing to hear his name mentioned by someone else who knew him. Later on, I learned a retired pastor I knew was Lynette Wray’s uncle. After being here awhile, I also learned that the parents of Joanne Kalacinski, who had been a member here, also had been members of one of my former churches.

The people events of the third God Friended Me episode, and my prior relationship experiences intersecting with people here, illustrate how God often works through what Andy Stanley calls “Providential Relationships” to try to grow BIG FAITH in us. This is because we were not designed to live in a vacuum. We were designed to live in relationship with other people. This is part of what it means to be created in the image of God, a being who is in triune relationship with Himself, and who wants to share the blessing of that way of living with the beings He created. We see this in the two passages of scripture that were read.

In the first passage, we were told that Adam and Eve had two sons: Cain and Abel. We were also told that “*Abel kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil.*” Translated into vocations, this meant Abel was a shepherd and Cain was a farmer. One day, Cain and Abel brought offerings to God. We are told that God “*looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor.*” Cain became angry. God tried to talk to him, but he wouldn’t listen. Instead, he lured his brother “*out to the field,*” and killed him. This story does more than record the first murder in history, however. It also speaks to the way God works through “Providential Relationships” to grow BIG FAITH in us. We see this when we examine the story in detail.

Abel was a shepherd. The Hebrew word for shepherd is “*shamar.*” That word translates as “*keeper,*” for a shepherd is a “*KEEPER of sheep.*” We see this usage in numerous places in the Bible. For instance, in chapter 2 of his gospel, Matthew quotes a prophecy from the prophet Micah about the birth of the Messiah: “*you Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are not the least among the chiefs of Judah: out of you will come a ruler, who will be the keeper of my people Israel.*” When Jesus finally came, He looked out over Jerusalem, and Matthew says “*he was moved with pity for them, because they were troubled and wandering like sheep without a keeper.*” As a result, when Cain replied to God questioning him about the whereabouts of his brother Abel, Cain sarcastically replied “*am I my brother’s keeper?*”

One of the reasons I think this story is in the Bible is that it tells us that we are indeed our brother’s keeper. This means that we not only should refrain from harming others, but should look out for their well being. It means, as Jesus would say, that we not only should refrain from letting our anger burn against others, but also love them. And it means that we should not only seek to restore others when they go astray, but also help them not get lost in the first place. The reason, as we heard from Tom in the video a few minutes ago, is that one of the ways God tries to grow BIG FAITH in us in through the interactions we have with other people.

For Tom, this began when he met Heather. She was friendly and nice - something that isn’t always the case in the world we live in (even with people who say they believe in God). In fact, Heather was so friendly, and so nice, that her way of living was attractive to Tom. So much so that he said she “*touched my heart and changed my life.*” That is the kind of influence God calls us to have in the lives of other people: being a good example, inviting people to consider a better way to live, and shining with the joy of God’s love. After they got married, Tom says Heather took things a step further, and told him “*you are going to church.*”

In sharing that memory, Tom said “*it was not an option.*” But it WAS an option. Tom could have said he was fine the way he was. He could have said he was willing to let her prod him to be friendly and nice, but he was not going to seek to go deeper and wider with God than that. Fortunately, that is not what Tom said, or did, and Tom is still here today - continuing to grow deeper and wider in his faith because of the way various “angels” helped him along the way.

We see what it’s like not to let God grow BIG FAITH in us through our encounters with other people in the second reading. In chapters 8 and 9 of John’s gospel, we are told how Jesus was in Jerusalem. He had been teaching the people about God’s love, and - as a result - the number of people following Him was growing. This irked the religious leaders, so they began to oppose Him. Jesus wasn’t bothered by this in a personal sense. He knew who He was, so their insults and lack of faith were not personally upsetting. What did bother Jesus was that these were the people who were supposed to be guiding the sheep. As priests and teachers of the Law, it was their job to be the “keepers” of God’s flock - and they were failing miserably at that task.

As a result, they were not only refusing to let God grow BIG FAITH in them, they were leading other people away from growing deeper and wider with God as well. In John 10, verse 11, Jesus therefore addressed the situation, saying “*I am the Good Shepherd.*” He then went on to explain what a good shepherd - or good keeper of the sheep - does and doesn’t do. Chief among the things a shepherd - or good keeper - must do, Jesus said, is be willing to lay themselves down sacrificially to enable their sheep to be called into the fold and remain there free of harm.

On each of the first three weeks of this current worship series, we looked at things we need to do to put ourselves in a place to hear God speaking to us. We need to engage teaching about the Bible in a practical way, for instance. We learned that this involves not just reading the Bible, or sitting in a worship service or Bible study where the Bible is being taught, but doing so with the intent of applying the divine principles we learn about IN our very lives. We need to engage in the means of grace the church has labeled as spiritual disciplines: prayer, worship, Bible study, as well as fellowship, giving, and service. For it is by personally engaging in these activities that we hear the specific things God wants to say to us about growing OUR relationship with Him, like where we may need to stretch and mature as His follower. And we need to be involved in personal ministry. For it is only in “putting into practice” the practical things we learn that we emulate Jesus to “*not to BE served, but TO serve.*”

This week, we have moved on to something over which we have little control. We did not choose, for instance, what family we were born into, or select our grandparents, parents, or siblings. Nor were we given the opportunity to pick our neighbors, our co-workers, or even our fellow church members. All around us there are people we had no input in selecting to be near us, and with whom we have no choice but to be in relationship. What we DO have control over, however, is HOW we interact with those persons, and HOW we view those relationships in terms of its effect on our relationship with God.

We can choose, for instance, to see people around us as sinners, or we can choose to see them as fellow children of God. We can choose to see the people around us as unfaithful followers of Jesus, or we can choose to believe that they are as interested in walking with Jesus as we are. And we can choose to see the people around us as unrelated to God's desire to grow BIG FAITH in the life of His children, or we can choose to see them as potential vessels through which God might want to help us grow BIG FAITH in our life, and ourselves as potential vessels through which God might want to help them grow BIG FAITH in their lives. We hear about this idea of learning to see ourselves as vessels God might want to use to grow BIG FAITH in others in a statement that will be shared with us by Gary Eshbaugh.

As in prior weeks, there is an insert in your bulletin. It has 6 questions listed on it. On each of the first six days this next week, I 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 to show you how Providential Relationships have brought you to where you are today in your walk with Him. Then ask God to place on your heart at least one person whom He would have YOU help grow in their walk with Him. Doing so might change not only their life, but yours as well, sending you off in a direction you may never have imagined, BUT which may alter your life forever in positive and joy-filled ways.