

In the past year or so, there have been a number of movies released that have focused not on people or events, but on brand-name products. The blockbuster *Barbie* was the most popular film last summer, followed by *The Super Mario Bros. Movie*, another film based on a product.

When it first released, in just two months, *Barbie* made \$575 million dollars from ticket sales across the country. It was “a children’s film made for adults,” said one reviewer, “done in a thoughtful and loving way.” Watching the film was like finding an old doll in your parents’ house and discovering that it had a message for you.

But *Barbie* and *The Super Mario Bros. Movie* are not alone. Theaters and streaming services have also been featuring films like: *Air*, *Tetris*, *BlackBerry*, and *Flamin’ Hot*. According to *The New York Times Magazine*, the movie *Air* told the story of Nike’s game-changing sponsorship deal with Michael Jordan “and the world-conquering shoes that emerged from it.

The film *Tetris* did the same for the popular video game it was named after, while *BlackBerry* gave the history of a “Canadian tech company whose cellphone went extinct.” *Flamin’ Hot* was a drama about the creator of spicy red Cheetos, a snack food that many people find to be addictive.

Apparently this trend will continue with future product-based movies that will focus on things like: American Girl Dolls, Barney, Hot Wheels, the Magic 8 Ball, Rock ’Em Sock ’Em Robots, Thomas the Tank Engine, and the board game Monopoly. Yes, you heard me right, Monopoly. It’s a popular game, for sure, but it hardly sounds like it would make for a gripping motion picture.

And yet, people appear to be drawn to these movies because they trust the brands. Children grew up loving their Barbie dolls. The Super Mario Brothers video game was played by kids across the country. Air Jordans were worn by teenagers who idolized Michael Jordan. And “Flamin’ Hot Cheetos”? Well,

according to a recent survey, 46% of Generation Z say they “love them.” Talk about brand loyalty.

But sadly, for the church in the United States today, the Christian brand is suffering. The Covid-19 pandemic prevented people from gathering for worship for more than a year, and many never got back in the habit. Church membership in the United States has fallen below 50% for the first time. “In addition,” reports *CNN*, “a cascade of headlines in recent years have stained the church’s reputation, including sex abuse scandals in the Roman Catholic Church; the spread of Christian nationalism; and the perception that the church oppresses marginalized groups ...” Evidently, we need to improve the Christian brand.

Fortunately, Jesus remains the most popular aspect of our faith. If we are going to improve our standing in our community and our nation, we need to focus intensely on his ministry and his mission. While fewer than 50% of Americans have membership in a church today, a recent Episcopal Church poll reveals that a full 86% consider Jesus to be an “important spiritual figure.” Clearly we need to align ourselves with the Jesus brand. And that means being a church that acts like Jesus.

Thankfully, our Lord reveals his personal brand in our Gospel lesson for today from John. “I am the good shepherd,” he says, using an image from the Middle East. He understands himself to be like the shepherd of Psalm 23, responsible for giving water, food and protection to his flock. But then he goes further than we would expect by saying, “The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”

That’s surprising, isn’t it? How many shepherds would really do that? Not many. They might work hard for their sheep, lose sleep for their sheep, and even fight for their sheep. But lay down their life? No. That’s the mark of a truly sacrificial shepherd.

Jesus then compares himself to a more typical caretaker of a flock. “The hired hand,” says Jesus, “who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them.” I’m fairly certain we can understand the reaction of the hired hand. He is like so many of us in the workplace today, willing to follow a job description and get the job done. But lay down his life? No way. Concludes Jesus: “The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep.”

Unsurprisingly, Jesus is a very different kind of caretaker. He is committed to the Good Shepherd brand. Ok, if that is the case, what would it mean for us be a church that acts like Jesus? Perhaps, we have to make changes, just as Barbie did when she said, “We fixed everything in the real world so that all women are happy and powerful.” Thank you, Barbie. Mission accomplished ... right? Not exactly.

As the church, we need to make changes in line with the Good Shepherd brand, beginning with a focus on personal relationships. For too long, the church has been transactional, inviting people to join the church so that they will fill the pews, put money in the offering plate, and volunteer for activities. But the Jesus brand demands a focus on relationships, between people and Jesus, people and God, and people and one another.

“I am the good shepherd,” says Jesus. “I know my own, and my own know me, just as the Father knows me, and I know the Father.” Here in the gospel of John, writes preaching professor Gail O’Day, knowledge is not an intellectual category, “but is a category of relationship.” Jesus does not simply know about us; he knows us personally. He does not simply have knowledge about God; he knows God intimately.

At the heart of the Christian faith is a web of relationships: Jesus knowing people, people knowing Jesus, God knowing Jesus, Jesus knowing God, God knowing people and people knowing God. Everything that matters in the church is

based on these deep-spirited relationships, which give rise to all the good that the church can do in the world. And these bonds can even lead to tremendous acts of sacrifice, as Jesus reminds us, when he says, “I lay down my life for the sheep.”

One of the greatest gifts that the church can give the world is the gift of community. At a time in which isolation and loneliness are reaching epidemic proportions, a congregation can connect people in life-giving ways. “Over the past several months,” writes columnist E.J. Dionne Jr. in *The Washington Post*, “an old truth has become new again: Houses of worship and other religious institutions play an essential role in promoting social connectedness, mutual aid, and community building. What has brought this realization to life is a widespread concern over the rise of loneliness and decline of forces that pull communities together. With religious disaffiliation soaring, especially among younger Americans, there is reason to worry that secular alternatives [to religion] are not growing fast enough to fill the void.”

I myself agree with his assessment, and feel that to many families these days are building their children’s lives on the sand of secularism, and not on the solid spiritual foundation that Jesus offers us. Thankfully, congregations like ours can help people overcome isolation and loneliness, provide regular social contact, serve as a community of support, provide meaning and purpose, encourage service and sacrifice, and motivate people to take action to improve the world around them. That’s the Good Shepherd brand.

But we need to keep in mind that Jesus also wants us to grow in relationship with people who are not yet a part of our congregation. “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold,” says Jesus. “I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So, there will be one flock, one shepherd.” In America today, Jesus is challenging us to welcome and include everyone we meet.

Today's passage concludes with a connection between God's love for Jesus and the willingness that Jesus showed to lay down his life. "I lay it down of my own accord," he says. "I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father." In other words, the Lord is returning to his earlier focus on sacrifice, but here he is making clear that he is giving of himself freely, for the good of others. And in a world in which many people focus more on themselves than on their neighbors, the complete self-giving sacrifice of Jesus is memorable and distinctive.

The Good Shepherd brand is based on sacrifice, on a deep relationship with people and with God, on the power of community, on a desire to reach new people, and on complete self-giving. And with so many competing religions and secular offerings surrounding us, it is imperative for us to stay focused on saying and doing what Jesus said and did.

At one point in the *Barbie* movie, a wise woman tells Barbie an important truth: "Humans have only one ending. Ideas live forever." Perhaps she's right. At the heart of the Christian faith is the Good Shepherd brand. That's an idea that will live forever. And thanks be to God for that! Amen.