

**“Dear Church, Learn from the Barbie Movie:
The Future Will Be Re-Imagined and Different”**

Acton Congregational Church (UCC)

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Texts: Genesis 12:1-4a

Acts 2:1-4

“Now the Lord said to Abram, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.’” – Genesis 12:1

Prayer

Gracious God,

It is good to gather in this place of worship

To be with people who are our fellow travelers on the journey of faith.

Let something meaningful happen

in our hearts and souls this morning

That we may feel excited, joyful, and passionate

About our commitment to be a faithful church in this time and in this world.

In the name of Christ, we pray. Amen.

Even before Greta Gerwig’s Barbie movie was released, I was determined that I was not going to watch it. The doll itself was never a part of my childhood, but the idea of the stereotypical Barbie made it almost impossible for me to imagine the movie as anything else but an expensive 114-minute celebration of a plastic toy that since 1959 has placed on girls the cultural pressure to conform to unrealistic body proportions and impossible beauty standards that are meant to please the male gaze. Research conducted by developmental psychologists have shown that girls from ages 3 to 8 that played with the original Barbie had lower self-esteem and poorer body image than girls who were not exposed to the doll at all.¹ As a man and pastor who believes in gender equality, I thought that boycotting the Barbie movie was a small but categorical rejection of an idealized plastic representation of womanhood that perpetuates harmful stereotypes.

Then, much to my surprised, my 80-year-old mother who lives some 5,000 miles from Boston in southern Brazil donned a bright pink funnel neck sweater (remember: it’s winter in the southern hemisphere) and joined a group of her friends, all clad in pink outfits, to watch “Barbie” at the cinema in her neighborhood. When I asked what she thought of the film, my mother said, ***“It’s very pink and very American, but it got one thing right – men cannot put women back in the box anymore.”*** My curiosity was immediately piqued. I wondered if my own stale perceptions of the Barbie dolls and the complicated history of this iconic American toy were holding me back and keeping me from going to see a movie that outperformed all expectations and broke the opening weekend record for a female director. So, I turned to the New Yorker, a trusted source for film reviews, to

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decide whether it would be a good idea to add my \$20 to the more than \$400 million dollars “Barbie” has brought in worldwide. And film critic Richard Brody gave me much more than an incentive to purchase the movie ticket. His review also got me thinking about our church at this time of transition in our youth programs.

Brody captures the essence of Greta Gerwig’s brilliant re-imagination of a doll that has been a shiny, cultural symbol of the independent, professional woman and, at the same time, the object that preserves the notion that women have to be constantly on their toes, trying to live up to an idea of femininity and beauty that has been mostly defined by men’s desires and fantasies. Brody wrote, ***“The great directors of fantasy are the ones who make explicit the connection between their fantasy worlds and lived reality... ‘Barbie’ – yes, a movie about a doll... is a far more personal film... ‘Barbie’ is about the intellectual demand and emotional urgency of making preëxisting subjects one’s own, and it advocates for imaginative infidelity, the radical off-label manipulation of existing intellectual property. Moreover, it presents such acts of reinterpreting familiar subjects, as a crucial form of self-analysis, a way to explore one’s own self-image and to confront the prejudices and inequalities built into prevailing, top-down interpretations of them. ‘Barbie,’ in other words, is a film of the politics of culture and, by extension, of the need for a creative rebellion to reëstrange the familiar for the sake of social change.”***²

Re-estranging the familiar for the sake of real, meaningful, transformative and life-saving changes is what the Christian faith and the Church stand for in the world. At the heart of our religious tradition is this call, this demand, this mandate to practice imaginative infidelity, to re-imagine the familiar, to confront the realities of prejudice and injustice built into our religious institutions and into our society and make explicit the connection between God’s Kingdom and our lives, between what we believe and how we live, between the Church and the world.

Greta Gerwig’s “Barbie” does an amazing job showing the wide chasm that exists between the promised utopia of human equality and the world of enduring patriarchy where social norms and cultural expectations push women ***“to strive for an impossible doll-like perfection”***³ every day of their lives. And it is in this chasm, this historic gap between the world that is and the world that could be, where you and I are called to be followers of Christ, church members, people who like the stereotypical Barbie in Gerwig’s film refuse to live happily in Barbie Land, or some religious fantasy paradise detached from reality, but choose instead to live as human beings in the real world, among real people of flesh and blood, doing everything we can to make that abyss between God’s hope for human life on earth and our society a bit smaller, hopefully narrower each day.

I will not spoil the movie for those who have not watched it yet by revealing too much about the plot, but I will say this: I do love how Gerwig’s used imaginative infidelity and quite a bit of creative rebellion not only to celebrate a toy that reminds millions of people around the world of their childhood playtime and dreams but also to challenge and

transform Barbie. The film does not pink-coat the negative cultural impact of Barbie on women's struggle for equality, instead the genius of the movie lies in its capacity to acknowledge Barbie's problematic past while at the same time giving the audience the opportunity to reconnect with the doll that now has a whole new meaning. It is almost as if Gerwig re-imagined Barbie and breathed new life into the doll. Barbie's new purpose is not only to affirm womanhood but also to confront and even bring down patriarchy in the real world.

In our faith tradition, the foundation of everything that happens in the Bible and that has been taking place during the course of the past 2000 years of church history goes back to God's creative and radical decision to invite an elderly couple to rebel against the familiar and leave behind their country, their own people, their family and the very home where Abram had grown up to move to a foreign land.

I have always wondered why God could not have blessed Abram in his own house and in his own land. My guess is that God needed Abram and Sarai to dare to exist in the world in a whole new way. When we are immersed in our familiar surroundings, taking care of our own business, focusing on our own family affairs, sometimes we do not have the energy or even the desire to go beyond the boundaries of what we already know. When we are part of a community that gives us all the support, love, friendship and security we need, it is easy to think that even God may be dispensable. So, God turns to this elderly couple, that is settled, safe, and set in their own ways and uproots them. ***"Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you."***

Because one's family and clan were key to one's identity and safety in the ancient world, leaving one's kindred was a very risky business and a show of dramatic trust in God. Even though Abraham was 75 years old and his wife Sarah had no children, they chose to make an explicit connection between their faith and their choices. They trusted in God's promise and left all that was familiar, predictable, comfortable, stable and reliable to do God's will in a new place. And I want to believe that they did it not because they had a blind faith, or because they were religious fanatics, or because they wanted to take away other people's land and property; no, I believe Abraham and Sarah in their old age took this bold step and embraced this divine imaginative infidelity because they hoped that their own complex and very human lives might be a blessing to all the families of the earth. For this is what God promised them, ***"Now the Lord said to Abram... 'I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing... and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.'"***

Of course, the temptation of the Church is always to stay put and not to budge, not even one inch away from our familiar places, traditions, music and programs. But, as the late and wise Henry Nouwen once put it, ***"The task of the religious community is to constantly move away from the comfortable situation and to look for areas where only one who is willing to give his life wants to go.... A religious community can***

only survive when it stays in contact with [God's] fire. It is the same fire which was the symbol of the new community on the day of Pentecost. Instead of huddling together and clinging to each other in fear, the apostles opened their doors, stepped into the world and went out in different directions. They knew that they were carried and supported by more than just the psychological experience of sympathy and friendship."⁴ They were carried, energized and inspired by the Holy Spirit!

The Book of Acts says that something strange and powerful happened on the day of Pentecost while the disciples were gathered. None of Jesus' first followers could quite fully explain what took place in that safe room of familiarity. Later on, as the early church tried to put Pentecost into words, people talked about a sound from heaven, a violent wind, and tongues as of fire, but what the first disciples knew for sure is that on Pentecost God's Spirit blew them out of their hiding place and gave them new words to speak boldly of a God who loves to push people out of their comfort zones to create diverse, imaginative, brave and thriving communities of faith.

There is something happening in these foundational biblical stories that has captivated the world for more than two millennia. The world is still surprised when Christ's followers, the Church, you and me, actually choose to leave the familiar behind to find new words to communicate God's love. Often, we refuse to go too far from the traditions that have kept us safe for countless decades. We can't quite bring ourselves to stand out there in the middle of the wind of change. We cannot or will not re-estrangle the familiar for the sake of much needed changes in the Church. We prefer living with the predictable, focusing on what we have always done, on what used to be, on what worked in the past, on biblical interpretations that fail to meet the intellectual demands and spiritual urgency of telling the stories of our faith in a way that resonates with people who are holding on to vivid and very negative assumptions about the church and, I assume, this is why so many churches have become irrelevant.

Henry Nouwen said, the "***Religious community ecclesia, which means called out of the land of slavery to the free land... is constantly moving away from the status quo, searching for what is beyond the here and now. As soon as the community becomes sedentary, it is tempted to lose its faith and worship the house-gods instead of the one true God who is leading it in a pillar of fire.***"⁵

In this time of transition in our youth ministries, we have to ask ourselves whether we have become sedentary Christians who are unable and unwilling to re-imagine how to nurture the faith of our youth or if our imagination is still fired up by a God who calls us out of the familiar so we may surprise the youth, our town and our world, perhaps even ourselves, by choosing to be a blessing.

I almost did not watch the Barbie movie because of the social, cultural, racial and sexual baggage I attached to the original Barbie. If my mother had not dressed in pink and gone to the theater and if Richard Brody had not written so eloquently about Gerwig's

creative and daring re-imagination of the doll, I probably would have not enjoyed the inspiring way that Greta Gerwig upends people's expectations and gives a more empowering purpose for Barbie that makes her relevant not only to women but to all of our lives in this chasm between what is and what we hope will be one day. And I imagine that there are a lot of people who attach a negative baggage to churches in our neighborhood and town, and you and I have to be the ones who will get dressed and go out there and talk eloquently about our call to connect our faith with the real world, to rebel against everything, every social norm, every cultural tradition, every religious teaching that makes people unequal, and to practice imaginative infidelity for the sake of a church that is on the move, searching for small and large ways to be a blessing to all the families in the pews, in Acton and in the world.

So dear church, learn this lesson from the Barbie movie: our future will not be found in the safe, comfortable, predictable and familiar box of our storied youth programs of yesterday, but in our capacity to re-imagine our youth ministries for tomorrow and let the rebellious Spirit of God give us a new language to talk about our hope for the children and youth in our congregation. Yes, our future will be different. In fact, right now, in the middle of this transition, God is already calling us to leave behind the baggage of familiarity and practice the same creative rebellion that gave Abraham and Sarah the courage to go to a land they never imagined they would see in their lifetime. God's Spirit is already moving among us, challenging us to make an explicit connection between our love for the youth programs and our willingness to get involved and volunteer to nurture the faith of the youth instead of waiting for someone else to do this important work of faith.

Dear church, here is an important lesson for us from the Barbie movie: thousands of people are going to the theater to watch this movie, despite Barbie's negative baggage, because this film connects them to something important and meaningful. "Barbie" invites them to re-imagine the future so men will never twist-tie women to a box again. The movie's message is relevant to us, the audience, even though injustice and inequality persist in Barbie Land as well as in the real world. But here in the church, we have a message that demands a complete re-estrangement of the familiar for the sake of real and profound changes in the human heart, so injustice and inequality do not go on unchallenged, and yet we are too timid to talk about it outside the church. And yet, this is our call – to completely re-imagine human life and say and do what we can to connect humanity to this God who created human beings equal and gives us a mandate to teach our youth to trust God and re-interpret the familiar so they can help our church to confront the prejudices and inequalities built into our world and take all of us a little closer to the promise of human equality. And this is how the Church will be a blessing to all the earth!

May it be so. Amen.

¹ By Karen E. Dill-Shackleford in [Barbie evokes suffering in girls, scorn in teens and finally gets reshaped](https://blog.oup.com/2016/02/barbie-body-image-social-), OUPblog, Oxford Press's Academic Insights for the Thinking World, 19 February 2016 [<https://blog.oup.com/2016/02/barbie-body-image-social->

psychology/#:~:text=Results%20indicated%20that%20these%20little,disordered%20eating%20and%20weight%20cycli
ng].

² By Richard Brody in "Barbie" is brilliant, beautiful, and fun as hell, The Front Row, The New Yorker, 21 July 2023,
[<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/the-front-row/barbie-is-brilliant-beautiful-and-fun-as-hell>].

³ Ibid.

⁴ Henry Nouwen in Intimacy, p. 104.

⁵ Ibid, p. 102.