What Godzilla can teach the church (Part 1: the Problem)

There seems to be quite a bit of excitement about the latest incarnation of the now world famous Japanese monster from the depths of the Pacific, which will be released tomorrow (as I write this), 5/16. Among the many articles appearing recently, recounting the history of the most famous monster, from the original film from 1954 (the original monster was a man in a 200 lb. suit, with the zipper visible up the back) to the current iteration, in full 3-D with all the spectacular effects modern digital technology can muster. Of course, this time instead of Tokyo getting the kibosh, now it’s my favorite city, San Francisco. Egads!

But one article in particular caught my attention. From the Associated Press, it appeared in my local paper on Tuesday, 5/13. Under the headline, “Even Godzilla sometimes takes his fights to court,” it was about the famous monster, and about the lengths to which the Japanese company that owns the copyright on it (him?), it’s image, it’s name, and all the multitude of spin-offs and parallel products based on it, goes to protect said image. That company, Toho Co, Ltd, retains a legal firm in Los Angeles (my other favorite city, but then, I’ve never visited New York) that has a long track record of protecting Godzilla’s, er, reputation. The article points out that, “since 1991 Toho’s attorneys have filed at least 32 copyright and trademark lawsuits and countless warning letters, gaining court injunctions …” which have resulted in losses to defendants as large as Honda and Comcast, as well as much smaller businesses and products that you’ve never heard of, because they won. Why go to all this trouble? “They need to protect their brand.” That is the point of this writing. What, exactly, is the Episcopal Church’s “brand”?

I recently had a conversation with a relative stranger, whose reaction when I told her I was an Episcopalian, was to ask, “What is that?” She had no idea what our church was. Now, she’s an intelligent, educated woman. True, this is the “far West” where the Episcopal Church is hardly the cultural icon that it is back East in the former Colonies. In fact, nearly all of my life and all of my ministry (35 years and counting) has been spent in the far West. So perhaps I’m just used to people not having any idea what our church is, what it believes, what it’s worship style is, etc. I’ve had to explain that more times than I can count. Yet, ask just about anyone on the entire planet “Who is Godzilla?” and I’m willing to bet they’ll have no trouble describing the famous monster. And therein lies our problem. We have no “brand identity.” No one knows who we are, what we do, what we have to offer. So why should they bother to visit us? No wonder there are so many empty pews in our churches!

But wait, it gets worse. The friend who asks, “What is that?” goes on to ask, “Is that a Christian church?” Now, since the ‘80’s when Ronald Reagan managed to join the Republican establishment with “the Religious Right” the term “Christian” has taken on a meaning in popular culture: that is, the “brand” known as “Christian” has become identified with what to us Anglican Christians is only a small portion of the larger Christian church, namely the conservative, Evangelical, and/or “fundamentalist” segment of the church (depending, of course, on what those terms even mean, or what we understand by them based on our own personal history and experience with people who represent themselves using those terms, so you see how messy this can get). So, when you answer, quite innocently, “Yes, it’s a Christian church,” you may feel the need to clarify just *what* *kind* of “Christian church” it is – to distinguish it from what your innocent questioner likely understands as “Christian” – namely someone who is against abortion, against homosexuality and certainly same-sex marriage, who may or may not believe in evolution, and God knows what they feel about climate change, but probably that guns don’t kill people, people kill people. In my experience, the “right wing” of Christianity in the U.S. has co-opted the “brand” of “Christian.” This is seen currently in articles reporting on the increasing number of states in which the courts have vacated prohibitions against same-sex marriage, and the primary opposition to marriage equality in those states comes from those who identify themselves as “Christians.” With this so common in the popular media, is it any wonder that those who are not currently practicing Christians, the roughly 70% of the population who are “un-churched,” have come to assume that the brand “Christian” is equivalent to what we Anglicans would term “conservative evangelical Christian,” in order to distinguish that particular strain of Christian tradition and current practice from our own? And therein lies a significant complication to our problem. Not only do people not know who we are, they aren’t clear what the term “Christian” means, at least as we Anglicans understand that term.

So, if many outside the church assume, based on portrayals in the media that “Christian” means what you and I understand as conservative Christianity (the “religious right” of the 80’s continuing to the present), and they have no idea what OUR particular “brand” of Christianity is, or how it might differ from the “brand” they assume to be “Christian,” how on earth are they to see that we have anything of interest to them to offer? And, further, what, if anything, are we consciously, actively doing to clarify the current confusion? Nothing, it seems.

A clergy friend of mine recently remarked about online ads produced by the United Methodist Church that she had seen, and drawn them to the attention of her bishop, whose response was that, “They spent a lot of money on advertising and it didn’t really help them.” There you have it. If it doesn’t work, why bother? On a purely pragmatic level, I have to agree. If you are struggling with already limited resources, why commit a significant amount of them to a project with little likelihood (at least short-term, so as to recoup on one’s investment) of success?

But what do we do, then, about our “brand,” or rather lack of one?

Patience, gentle reader (as Miss Manners says) and I kindly ask that you read on in Part 2…