



Pastor's Column

Reverend Mark Nakagawa

October 2009

Dear Centenarians:

Last month I attended the Aki Komai Memorial Awards, named after the person who founded the Nisei Athletic Union (N.A.U.) sports leagues here in southern California over 60 years ago.

At the beginning of the afternoon ceremony one of our members, Tetsu Tanimoto, received a special recognition for his instrumental role as a co-founder of this annual event. Later on during the afternoon, another longtime Centenary member, Al Morita, was an Aki Komai memorial award recipient.

During his remarks, Tetsu shared a very poignant story that illustrated the league's struggles in its early years. A basic problem was the difficulty in finding gyms that would allow Japanese American sports teams to rent playing time.

Fortunately, a friend of Mr. Komai named Duke Llewellyn was then working at a gym in the Long Beach area. When he heard about the difficulties that the Japanese American league was facing, he took it upon himself to literally "open the gym doors" so that the league could operate. Another hurdle that had to be overcome was finding referees for the games. Once again, Duke Llewellyn found a solution: he and a friend refereed the games.

As the league grew and developed, "Duke" continued as a game official until the 1960's. He then went on to become an executive with the Los Angeles Athletic Club. Years later, he founded the John R. Wooden Award, which recognizes the top collegiate basketball player of the year.

Prior to his involvement with N.A.U., Duke had established an impressive athletic career in his own right as a professional football player and boxer. And yet, at a particular point in his life, he found himself in the position of being asked to perform a simple but important task: to open up doors for a people and community with whom, I suspect, he had little previous contact.

Duke Llewellyn's example of friendship embodies a spiritual component that we can recognize as people who follow Jesus Christ. That is, Jesus calls us to "open up the doors" for those who find themselves on the short end of life's realities. Time and again throughout the Gospels, Jesus models a faith that opened doors to those who were shunned by the larger society (the Samaritan woman), sick and in need of healing (the paralytic man), hungry, and in need of nourishment (feeding the 5,000).

In the same way that Duke Llewellyn's friendship led to him opening the doors for Japanese American youths who desired simply to play basketball, our faith in Jesus Christ as Lord calls us to be a people who seek to open up doors for people who desire new lives of meaning and purpose.

Whether it is in opening up the doors to a gymnasium, or opening up the doors that enable a person to experience new life, let us be responsive at those moments in our lives when God calls us to be the ones who open those doors.

Grace and Peace,

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