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God's Kingdom Comes Near
Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, Ohio

Right outside the front door of the church building something as wonderful as the Kingdom of Heaven manifested. In our neighborhood, God's Kingdom was so close we could have touched it, maybe some of us did.

An article dated September 13 in *The Post* introduced us to a remarkable Ohio University alumna who is in her own way, bringing God's Kingdom closer. Her name is Akisa Fukuzawa. She was born and raised in Tokyo Japan where she found her calling, her passion, playing baseball. She formed her first women's baseball team in the 1980's when she was in college, but because there were no degree programs in sports administration that accepted women in Japan at the time, Akisa turned to the United States, where she was accepted in the sports administration and management program here at Ohio University.

Here at OU, Akisa asked the question that continues to be a driving force for her today: why is there no women's baseball? There is a historical precedent for it, as anyone familiar with the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League that played during World War II knows. Akisa's question and OU faculty brought her to an internship with the Colorado Silver Bullets, a professional women's baseball team formed in the mid 1990's that played exhibition games to create a women's baseball league. When sponsors dropped out after only three years ending the Silver Bullets, Akisa had learned a lot but was no closer to the answer to her question.

In 2008, she started another women's baseball team, this time in Columbus, Ohio, the Columbus JetStream. They played other women's teams around the country for eight seasons. If you want to learn more, Akisa's story was featured on a lovely and inspiring episode of the television series *Little America*. At the end of that episode, a postscript reported Akisa is currently pursuing a PhD here at Ohio University to go deeper into the question of why there is no women's baseball. And last semester Akisa started another women's baseball team here in Athens. Perhaps some of you saw them play.

Akisa's passion does more than just make for inspiring television entertainment or newspaper stories. She is an embodiment of what Jesus was calling people to in today's Gospel: to repent and help him bring about the Kingdom of Heaven, what other Gospels refer to as the Kingdom of God. If you

have a hard time equating baseball with God's Kingdom, there are plenty of books and movies that describe God's Kingdom of Heaven with baseball; the movie, *Field of Dreams* is just one you might be familiar with.

When Jesus was calling people to repent, he wasn't trying to shame them for sinful behaviors. The word *repent* doesn't mean to feel bad. It means to change direction; like a course correction, such as when the GPS recalculates your route after you miss a turn or a road is closed. The course Jesus is inviting people to change is that of the status quo, the culture, whose values are contrary to that of God. Like the idea that the only way to stop violence is with more violence, or the belief that the sole purpose of a person's life is to keep whatever economy, government or institution going.

Take for example the fishermen Jesus called in today's Gospel. They were serving the Roman Empire who occupied their land by participating in the economy that benefited Rome. Notice these fishermen all had equipment like boats and nets, which indicates they were probably pretty secure in their work, as long as they paid their taxes, and the fish population didn't decrease. Jesus called them away from supporting Rome's economy to follow him and help him bring God's kingdom a little closer. That is what he meant when he said following him would change them into fishers for people. For those in different lines of work, Jesus would have used different phrases. Perhaps for Akisa Fukuzawa, he would say something like, follow me and we'll play baseball with all kinds of people.

God's Kingdom is not a paradise in an afterlife we call heaven. God's Kingdom of Heaven is this world the way God dreamed it would be like when God created it. It is a world where God rules instead of imperial entities like the modern equivalent to ancient Rome. In God's kingdom we are all beloved children, which means there is no racism, no ableism, no economic disparity, no misogyny, or sexism which means baseball can be played and enjoyed by people of all genders, all ages, all abilities. Which is why, in her way, by pursuing her passion for women's baseball, and by continuing to challenge the powers that be that insist on men's only baseball, Akisa Fukuzawa is working to bring God's Kingdom a little closer to reality.

Akisa's story isn't just inspiring for what she is trying to do for women and the sport of baseball. She is reminding us that answering Jesus' call isn't just about leaving what you know and love to become an ordained minister or professional religious like a nun or a monk. That is a different and specific calling. All followers of Jesus are called to participate in the type of healing Jesus did in

the Gospel. The problem with healing stories is we tend to focus on the miraculous physicality of healing, which can lead to moving farther away from God's kingdom by discriminating against anyone who is ill, disabled, differently abled, addicted, etc. God's kingdom is about healing that kind discrimination. The healing Jesus did is about restoring wholeness, not only to individuals, but to families and communities. The healing Jesus brings is the repairing of breaches in families, communities, and institutions as a sign of God's presence and the type of society that is centered on loving God and loving our neighbor, not a society centered around producing, consuming, and dividing.

This call isn't just for ancient fishermen or a woman who loves baseball. We are all called, in some way, to follow Jesus which means we are all called to help bring God's kingdom of heaven a little closer. What that looks like depends on our passion, on what we love. If we love our job, then we might ask how we can in or through our work help others feel valued, respected, cared for. If what we love is music, we can ask how through our love of music can we invite others to experience the connection or joy we find in it. If what we love is cooking, then we can ask how we can share what we enjoy about cooking to help teach others to prepare food for themselves and others. If what we love is the church, being together to worship, to praise God, then we can ask how we as a parish can continue to be an Episcopal presence to our neighbors. We already do that through our ministries, but maybe we are being called to new ministries or to renew ministries that have taken a hiatus.

Another thing we can do is recognize when someone else in our neighborhood is engaged in God's Kingdom of Heaven work, like OU PhD student Akisa Fukuzawa who dreams of a day when everyone who loves baseball can play together at whatever level we choose. And when we recognize someone doing Kingdom work, ask if there is anything we can do to help support it. Whether it is baseball, cooking classes, pay-it-forward coffee, music therapy, or providing a place to grieve losses, God's Kingdom of Heaven can and does break through the busyness of our routines when we answer the call to follow Jesus in the healing Kingdom of Heaven work, and support each other in that call together.