

Sunday: Easter IV, Cycle C, 4.17.16  
 Scripture: Acts 13:14,43-52/Rev 7:9-14-17/  
 Jn 10:27-30

## **BREAKING NEW GROUND; SHAKING OLD FOUNDATIONS**

Breaking new ground is always a challenge, isn't it? There's no easy way to move from "the way we were" to the way things could be or ought to be, or the way we'd like them to be. People who break the ice meet with resistance and opposition. They can be perceived as "the enemy," those "troublemakers" who are always stirring things up. The person who is pushing people into the future can feel isolated and alone -- apart from the mainland, rejected and abandoned. The school board member who tries to promote a change in the school's science curriculum; the teenage son or daughter who suggests a different vacation spot than the one the family has been going to year after year; the employee who recommends some cost-cutting approaches that will require co-workers and management to learn new techniques and change old company habits. Turning aside from old paths, no matter how tried and true, and embracing a new direction forces a confrontation that most people would rather avoid.



On the other hand, sometimes the future comes upon us sooner than we expected and finds us unprepared. We're caught off guard by the transition, forced to move out of a comfortable place. The

ground under us begins to shake and we don't know how or when it will stop.

This Sunday, with its scripture readings about Jesus the Good Shepherd, is designated as an annual day of special prayer for vocations to ministry in the Church. In the 1950's and early 60's, seminaries and novitiate houses, the places of formation for religious orders of priests, brothers and nuns, were being built throughout the country. Religious communities were bursting at the seams with new members. No one anticipated that in less than a decade, most of those novitiates would be empty -- white elephants. Some religious orders lost twenty percent, some as many as fifty or sixty percent of their membership during the sixties and seventies. No one anticipated the cultural shift that would set our society in a tailspin for decades to come -- the political upheaval of the 60's and the era of public protest marches; the anti-authoritarian spirit that motivated university students to take over campuses and offices of the college president; the institutional dissent that pitted the younger generation against everything traditional; the spiritual questioning that found even the most conservative people breaking away from their traditional religious roots; the cultural disintegration among youth.

Whether you were the innovator, paving the way for monumental changes in our society, or whether you were an unsuspecting bystander, watching the upheaval of so much that you held sacred or thought could never change, all of us are together in the challenge of moving into the future, boldly and creatively, as followers of the Risen Lord and members of his body, the Church. The Word of God for this Sunday in the Easter Season points out to us a parallel situation of dramatic reversal and gives us inspiration for moving into an uncertain future. The leaders of the early

Christian communities faced a difficult challenge. They planted the seed of God's Word, but they couldn't control the field or the harvest. That was ultimately in God's hands. The Acts of the Apostles narrates that Paul and his companion Barnabas were having great success in bringing the Word of God to many people. They gained quite a following, even to the point of enraging the Jewish leaders. Emotionally, Paul and Barnabas were caught up in the excitement of many new converts and the enthusiastic reception by the entire city. Then, when they were on such a high, sustained only by the contagious inspiration of the moment, a notable group of people reacted jealously and angrily.

Paul replied calmly, clearly, and courageously. He didn't back down. With fearless determination he spoke the words that would ring throughout the scriptures and throughout the world. ***We now turn to the Gentiles!*** This monumental decision -- spreading the gospel outside the Jewish circle -- changed the face of Christianity forever. Paul didn't realize all the consequences. He was too intelligent not to be aware of the theological difficulties to be raised by the Jewish Christians who practiced the Mosaic law and its customs. He would struggle through two major epistles, Galatians and Romans, to clarify the case for himself and for the Church. But here was a turning point that was entirely unexpected. This faithful Jew now saw that the wind of the Spirit was blowing in a new direction. This new direction would carry him nearly 15,000 miles in service of the gospel.



From his own pen we read the challenge of Paul's apostolic efforts. He wrote: *five times I received forty lashes less one; three times I was beaten with rods; I was shipwrecked three times; I traveled continually, endangered by floods, robbers, my own people, the gentiles; imperiled in the city, in the desert, at sea, by false brothers; enduring labor, hardship, many sleepless nights; in hunger and in thirst and in frequent fastings, in cold and nakedness.*

None of us knows the surprising turns that our lives will take. A man commits himself to a woman and a marriage relationship which he envisions will last his whole life. After a few years, circumstances change, the relationship sours and he finds himself divorced and alone. A social activist who protested war and nuclear arms in the sixties, worked for racial equality in the seventies, now, in this century, finds herself devastated by the lack of progress society exhibits in our peace-making efforts and racial equality. A mother or father, after years of providing care and the best example and role modeling for a child, experiences frustration as the child, now a young adult, can't seem to pull it all together. Through all the trials and upsets that come our way, we can only be certain about one thing -- the voice of the Good Shepherd that calls us to follow his way.

Sometimes, like Paul and Barnabas, we have to kick the dust of the past from our feet and move with resolve onto the path that leads to the future. Bold new initiatives are the order of the day if we are to face the monumental challenge of creating a viable future. At other times we have to hold firm to the tried and the true, convinced that there are values we dare not lose lest we imperil the next generation. Always we need to seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit in order to discern the movement and direction of God's grace that is ever present, even if subtle and disguised. Thomas Merton, a

spiritual spokesperson for the 1960's whose voice and writings still ring loud and true, wrote this prayer asking for God's guidance through challenge and turmoil. Many people have made it their prayer too.



*My Lord God,  
 I have no idea where I am going.  
 I do not see the road ahead of me.  
 I cannot know for certain where it will end.  
 Nor do I really know myself,  
 and the fact that I think  
 I am following your will  
 does not mean that I am actually doing so.  
 But I believe that the desire to please you  
 does in fact please you.  
 And I hope I have that desire  
 in all that I am doing.  
 I hope that I will never do anything  
 apart from that desire.  
 And I know that if I do this,  
 you will lead me by the right road  
 though I may know nothing about it.  
 Therefore will I trust you always  
 though I may seem lost  
 and in the shadow of death.  
 I will not fear, for you are ever with me,  
 and you will never leave me  
 to face my perils alone.*

*Father John Kasper, OSFS*