

April 30, 2023
The Fourth Sunday of Easter: Good Shepherd Sunday
St. Stephen's, Catlett' St. Andrew's, Ada
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Acts 2:42-47
Psalm 23
1 Peter 2:19-25
John 10:1-10

Our Gospel includes an element that I've never really noticed before: thieves and bandits. Jesus mentions them twice in today's Gospel; once at the beginning, and once at the end. That tells me that Jesus knows that our communities, whether they be our church community, our work community, our family community, or some other group of people we identify with, have thieves and bandits in them. Who are these guys, and what is the difference between a thief and a bandit?

It seems to me that bandits steal openly by means of weapons or other threats, and thieves steal in secret. With that distinction, I believe that we can all think of people who use various threats to try and rob us of dignity, goodwill, or whatever else they want. We can also probably think of thieves in our lives who don't pose an obvious threat as long as we never know what they're really taking from us.

Now the passage we heard from the Acts of the Apostles paints a picture of happy sheep living together in perfect harmony. And they were, until the bandits and thieves invaded their communities. The bandits were the Roman soldiers and Jewish temple authorities who tried rob the communities of their faith by threatening Roman execution or Jewish banishment from the Temple. The thieves, on the other hand, were the false teachers who came into the established communities and tried to take what the apostles had given to those communities.

Sad to say, sin being what it, our lives and our various communities of friends and families also include some bandits and thieves – people who threaten us, people who treat us badly, people who try and steal our dignity and self-worth or even our faith. When stolen from, our natural impulse is to get our stuff back and then to exact revenge. The first letter of Peter has something to say about that natural impulse, however. Peter tells us that our lust for revenge is a clear sign that we are straying from the very community – the sheepfold – that God has given us. The twenty-third Psalm supports this position by claiming that God sets a table before us in the presence of our enemies. We all know they're here, but we're going to sit at the table and eat anyway.

It's one thing to rest in the protective guidance of the Good Shepherd and to face the bandits and thieves in our lives with serenity, but what about those times when we willingly give those bandits what they want? I can't tell you the number of times I have discovered far too late that I gave my perfectly good mood away to someone who troubled me. I give my own serenity away to people I allow to annoy me. Even more significantly, I discover that I give my own power away to any bandit or thief who thinks they can have it. How much of everything we hold most dear in our lives do we just hand over to someone else without even a second thought?

God gives us a new day every twenty-four hours and asks us to stick around the herd, to try and stay out of trouble, and to delight in everything God sends our way. With absolutely no warning, I can throw that entire day away with the complaint that "someone ruined it," which is no different from saying that a bandit or a thief came in and stole it from me. In fact, no one stole it; I gave it away willingly.

Sure, our lives include bandits and thieves who want to steal what we have, but just as often, we give it all away to the first person who says boo to us. Our readings invite us to explore the difference between what we lose by theft and what we give up without threat, coercion, or secrecy. I for one am amazed at the immense power I give to other people; power that might do more good in the Hands of a Good Shepherd.