

“OFF”

Romans 1:18-23; 2:17-24; 3:9-11/Luke 18:9-14

FPC/September 11, 2011

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I. Introduction

Off. The baritone was off. I don't have an ear for those things, but my wife Jeanne does. I grew up with Johnny Cash and John Denver. Jeanne grew up with classical music. I'm learning. Jeanne just knows. The baritone struggled for volume and range. When it was pointed out, I could hear it too. The opera went on. But the baritone was off. Sometimes it just happens.

I may not have a classical music ear, but I know the sounds of our house. Not long ago in the still of the evening I heard the power vent on our hot water tank come on. When the hot water tank comes on this fan vents the gases outside. It has a particular sound. I heard it come on. It sounded funny. Then it went off. Then it came on again.....and off again...this time for good. And when it shut down, it also shut down the hot water tank. Now the hot water was.....off.

Central Heating came to look at it. The repairman quickly found the problem. My friends, the yellow jackets, were back. They had built a nest in the pipe that vents the gas. The nest acted like a cork, and shut down the power vent. I saw the nest the repairman pulled out, and for the next couple days sprayed wasp spray in the pipe. Everything still sounds fine when the power vent comes on. But I'm listening, knowing that those yellow jackets are persistent, and things could be off again.

Off.....not right....less than we expected.....strange.....troublesome...
...worrisome.....not working right...broken...we look around and know things are off with the world. A woman is charged for stealing from the doctor's office where she worked. A robbery suspect is apprehended. A young man breaks into the house of an older man who had helped him. The break-in happened when the robber knew the older man was in surgery for cancer. The police report on drug arrests and drunken driving arrests is lengthy. Amidst all the other news in the Sharon Herald this past Thursday (9/8/11), we read of these things and know something is off.

Off.....we look back on 9/11 and the 10 years since that day. We remember the surreal image of planes flying into buildings, collapsing towers and rolling waves of dust, years of war in Iraq and Afghanistan, exhausted soldiers, car bombs, drone airplane attacks in Pakistan.....on 9/11 we know down deep things are off.

Off.....and if we really look inside we know things are not right there either. The lies we tell. The gossip we share. The vengeance we hang onto. The need we ignore. The care we withhold. The hurtful word we speak. The selfishness we justify. The lust we hide. The greed we excuse. Amidst the good we try to do.....we see that things are off.

Off.....we have a word for that in the Christian faith. It's called sin. Honestly, it's a little hard to know how to talk about sin today. It seems old fashioned....from another day. For years we've lived with "I'm OK, You're OK," the power of positive thinking, and building positive self-esteem. It's a therapeutic culture. Sin has dropped out of our understanding about life.....and confession of sin has disappeared from the worship life of many churches.....it's too negative, too critical, too much a downer. Certainly talk about sin has been abused to bury people in guilt, and manipulate them.....but is it honest to ignore it? Or more importantly; is it Christian?

II. Text and Brief Exegesis

Off a little, or off a lot.....it's sin. As we start our fall sermon series in Paul's letter called Romans, we start with sin. We start with sin, because Paul starts with sin. He has great news about God's grace in Jesus Christ for all people. But before he gets there, Paul talks about sin. It reminds me of the situation with the old Christian bumper sticker: "Jesus is the Answer." When I'd see that I'd wonder, "what is the question?" Paul rightly starts with the question before he gets to the "answer."

What I'd like to do is creatively put the more familiar reading from Luke 18, which we heard this morning, together with the more challenging texts from Romans.....to try to weave them together. Let's see what happens.

"Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The religious outsider, the tax collector, stood far off, and would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, 'God, be merciful to me a sinner.'" (Luke 18:10, 13)

Read Romans 1:18-23.

18 For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth. ¹⁹For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. ²⁰Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse; ²¹for though they knew God, they did not honour him as God or give thanks to him, but

they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened. ²²Claiming to be wise, they became fools; ²³and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles.

In a moment of honest insight the tax collector the religious outsider, knows things are off....off in his community and off in his life. Deep down he knows God's glory in the creation around him, but he has made other choices. He knows he has no excuse. Time after time he has made the choice to worship the things of this world....to make them his gods. And he knows that God's judgment has meant that God has just stepped back.....just stepped back let him pursue his gods.....and his life is empty. His choice has brought him to the place of honoring money, status, power and nice things.....but he is a stranger to God. His life is off. He is a sinner, and he knows it. All he can do is stand before God and confess his sin. He is humble and broken.

“Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The religious insider, the Pharisee, prayed to God, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people; thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like that tax collector over there. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of my income.’” (Luke 18:10-12)

Read Romans 2:17-24.

17 But if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast of your relation to God ¹⁸and know his will and determine what is best because you are instructed in the law, ¹⁹and if you are sure that you are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, ²⁰a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of children, having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth, ²¹you, then, that teach others, will you not teach yourself? While you preach against stealing, do you steal? ²²You that forbid adultery, do you commit adultery? You that abhor idols, do you rob temples? ²³You that boast in the law, do you dishonour God by breaking the law? ²⁴For, as it is written, ‘The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.’

There is a danger in being a religious insider. The Pharisee is proud of his religious life. Others may be off and far from God, like that tax collector, but the Pharisee is sure of his place. Just look at his life.....it's religious. But he misses the deeper, darker power of sin. His life is off. It is off because he thinks a relationship with God is based on being religious. It's off because he believes he can stand before God due to the law he obeys. It's off because he believes he controls his own salvation...it's his own righteous work. He is religious, but he is a stranger to God. His life is off. He is a sinner. But he doesn't see it. Religious busyness can do that; blinded by pride.

“Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. I tell you, the tax collector, the outside, went down to his house justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.” (Luke 18:10, 14)

Read Romans 3:9-11.

9 What then? Are we any better off? * No, not at all; for we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin,
¹⁰as it is written:

¹⁰There is no one who is righteous, not even one;

¹¹ there is no one who has understanding,
there is no one who seeks God.

There's an outsider and an insider, a tax collector and a Pharisee....and one is forgiven. Is it the Pharisee because he's more religious? No. Is it the tax collector because he's more religious? No. Outsiders and insiders....tax collectors and Pharisees....no one can stand before God due to his or her own righteousness. Everyone's life is off. Everyone is a sinner. It's the one who humbly confesses sin that is forgiven. It's the one who is honest who is justified.

III. Conclusion

As you know, the 11:00PM Christmas Eve service is my favorite worship service here. There is a peace and holiness about it. It seems like the veil between holiness and this world is a little thinner at that time. There's a quiet joy about it. It's a holy moment.

And my second favorite service.....well that's become a curious thing. My second favorite worship service has become our Ash Wednesday evening service.....the service that begins Lent. With candles, prayers, scripture simple songs and ashes we confess the limits, struggles and corruption of our lives. It's an honest service. I think that is why I have come to like it so much. All the masks and pretending are put aside, and we consider for a moment the things that really trouble us most; sin and death. And for a moment we become the outsider, the tax collector, who comes to the temple to pray; “God, be merciful to me a sinner.”

Life is off. We are sinners. But we confess that not to be paralyzed in guilt. Rather we confess it because it's honest. And we confess it because only in doing that are we truly open to the good news of God's grace....which is always “on.”