

# Sermon Text for June 1, 2025

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

## *Joshua 6:22-25 and Matthew 21:28-32* *“Better late than never”*

What a blessing it was for this church to have Vladimir Tatarnikov with us this past week or so. His reality is so very different from ours in his life as a disciple of Jesus Christ. He noticed certain things that we just take for granted. Like why do we have cups the size of Manhattan to drink our water out of? He couldn't get over that. He was always surprised by the quality of our roads and not just 95 but even out in the countryside. The roads in Belarus and in Russia once you get outside of the populated areas are dirt roads. Like you would never see a paved road in a town like Strasburg, or if it was the state of it would be better if it were dirt.

Because there are sanctions from Europe and the United States they are not able to get certain things so he was able to shop to buy things for the church and for his people and himself and his family. You can't get this headset in Belarus, you have to leave the country to buy it, so he bought one because his was broken. It is so different being a Christian in Belarus than it is here in this Borough. When Vladimir arrived in Belarus in 2009 there were two communities that were meeting and worshipping together, now there are 5. The Gospel is being preached and the social ministries in which they are involved is so significant. And it is done by those who have so little. The material resources that they have are minimal, but what they are able to do with it should make us look at our work and ask the question of how are we living out our calling with what we have?

What can we learn about God and the Gospel by finding ourselves among those chosen by God in a different way than we are and in a way that one could look at objectively and say that their lives are harder than ours. Both Scriptures speak about God's prioritizing the poor and the outcast and even those who have chosen to be outside of society as his preferred. What we find today are the tax collectors and the prostitutes who love him in ways we don't understand. It is a warning for us who think church can only be done one way, in this traditional mainstream way. Let's read.

### **READ**

We had one of our more powerful opportunities a week or so ago to meet and pray with those whom we are supporting, we have a representative with us from Water Street, we had our missionaries from Boston and from the near East whom we support and we just prayed over them. Each of them, even Water Street, is such a different reality than what we know and

understand here in Strasburg. We heard about our missionaries needing to make decisions about sending their children to college while they are thousands of miles away, not very simple decisions complicated by the miles that separate them. We find in our Scriptures the way of righteousness, again not only in our Gospel of righteousness but throughout, redefined in ways that can surprise us.

The story of Rahab is one of those. This is the story of Joshua fighting the battle of Jericho and before he destroys the city and overcomes it he sends those spies who had previously gone into the city and found refuge with the prostitute Rahab to go in and liberate her family. Rahab who was a woman for hire is selected by God as the only person and her family to be saved from destruction. Rahab the prostitute who is not only highlighted in this story as living forever with the people of God, but also is Jesus' great great great so on grandmother. Does it bother you that Jesus' grandmother was a prostitute? I'm guessing even hearing me say that word here in public in a church just might make us feel a bit uncomfortable. The story of Rahab, the prostitute, and its impact on the salvation story changes the calculus of who God is and what does God expect of us.

I want us to hear this for the first time today and then we are going to come back to it, we find it in Matthew 7:21, not everyone who calls Lord Lord will be received into the kingdom. As if that might be all we need. A week ago Friday the ministry Our Table that meets in our Fellowship Hall every Friday evening had a record breaking crowd. Over 100 people showed up to be fed and most left for what came next, but the people came. There is some overlap with those who attend Our Table and this church, but the vast majority is definitely a crowd that would feel less comfortable in here than they do in Fellowship Hall. We tend to define doing church in one specific way, but our time with Vladimir, our time with those missionaries, our time with this ministry that meets every week in our building, should tell us a different story. Because Jesus tells us a different story.

The parable that we find in Matthew is one of many parables that we have of two sons, one who does the will of the Father and the other who does not. You remember the parable of the prodigal son, there are others like that as well in Scripture. Clearly in this parable Jesus is talking to the religious leaders, remember after the ride into Jerusalem and the clearing of the temple, the next day they ask him by what authority are you doing these things, this is the same next day conversation and he tells them a parable to continue to add to the answer of by what authority. He sets up this parable to tell them that they think they are doing God's will, but they are not, and those that the religious leaders have excluded from their community, the tax

collectors and the prostitutes, have been included into the kingdom of God while they are excluded.

The story goes that a son is asked to help out in the vineyard, collecting the harvest, he says no, but then he actually does go and do it. I have done many funerals for those who are not involved in any church in their life and I know that the assumption is that because someone was not involved in church they were not involved with God. Nothing could be further from the truth. Church is a way to live out your faith, but it is not the only way. Our assumptions that church is the only way is preventing us from doing ministry from those who feel either unworthy to step into this building or burned and angry with the church because they have been hurt and abused by church people, like the pharisees and the scribes.

Those who say no like the first son are the tax collectors and the prostitutes whom others have discounted as not doing the will of God, but then behind closed doors they actually are. The religious leaders are those who go to church and serve in leadership positions but actually have ignored the work that God has put before them. The pharisees were blind to what John was doing right there in the midst of them. Jesus calls John pursuing the way of righteousness, and they completely missed it. They say they are working in the vineyard and harvesting the grapes, but in reality they are just rearranging the stones along the path to make them look prettier.

There is nothing more important than the way of righteousness. We see that in Matthew 23, we see that in our lives as well, where church people are condemning people while they themselves look to benefit themselves and only themselves. There is nothing more important in our lives than pursuing the way of righteousness. I hope my legacy 30 years from now you will say, yeah, I remember Pastor Bob, he was the one who always said that our personal with Jesus had to be seen in our pursuit of righteousness, doing the will of God. Not speaking the will of God, but doing the will of God. Not saying yes and then not obeying the Gospel, but rather pursuing it from the very beginning.

The pharisees here, their refusal to see God at work in John's ministry anticipated their rejection of Jesus. In the same way if we miss how God is working in our midst, and how different people in different contexts are pursuing righteousness even outside of the church walls, then we will be no different from the Pharisees who say that church can only be done one way. Today we are taking communion together, this sacrament that levels the playing field. This sacrament tells those of us who are self assured in our salvation because of how we do church that we need to think about how are we doing the will of God, not so much church.

There are others who like the tax collectors and the prostitutes might think that they are too late, that their sin serves as a barrier to a relationship between us and God. I say better late than never, I say it is not too late. If you are here today convinced that you don't belong in this church because of your unworthiness, if you are convinced that Jesus wants nothing to do with you, today's Scripture is made just for you. Jesus says that you understand the way of righteousness better than your pastor does, now that is humbling and sobering for me, but it should be freedom for you to reach out your arms and embrace the one who loves you more than you can imagine. It is not too late.

We too can become blind to what God is doing in the world around us. Church work can quickly become maintaining the institution, with no excitement about God's active grace and excitement for renewal. This communion table tells us it is not too late. This is not our table, this is God's table and we would be wise to hear God's word that any attempt that we make to make it our table will be faced with a realization at some point how far we have fallen from the glory of God. The religious leaders make a claim to righteousness but fall short, the tax collectors and prostitutes make no claim at all, but they believe.

May God in the reading and hearing of his Holy Word instill within us a desire to see his work all around us, even in the most surprising ways. Amen.