

- 1) Does the name *Yusuf Hawkins* mean anything to you? Probably not.
 - a) I had almost forgotten about it, until it appeared recently in a *New York Times* article.
 - b) He was that young man who was attacked and killed
 - i) By a group of angry teens in the summer of 1988
 - c) Why? Because he went to the Bensonhurst section of Brooklyn
 - (1) to inquire about a car for sale.
 - ii) And this group of local kids had heard that there was a girl dating black and Hispanic boys.
 - iii) And they were gonna make sure that did not happen.
 - (1) Because of course they were Bensonhurst boys -
 - (2) They were white and Yusuf was black.
 - d) In retaliation, Al Sharpton led a march through Bensonhurst that nearly precipitated a riot.
 - i) Although the kid who shot Yusuf, Joey Fama, was eventually convicted
 - (1) The resulting media frenzy lasted for years;
 - (2) As did the resulting racial tensions.
 - e) Why? Simply because
 - i) a black kid came into a white neighborhood.
 - ii) A white Girl was supposedly dating Hispanic boys
 - iii) An African American minister led a protest march through an Italian American neighborhood.
 - f) People were breaking rules, transgressing borders; crossing lines.
- 2) And that is not wise - anyone will tell you that.
 - a) From the time we are children we are taught by our parents
 - i) who we can play with,
 - ii) what we can do
 - iii) when we can do it,
 - iv) where we can go and
 - v) why we should never break their rules.
 - b) As we grow we learn new rules from our teachers,
 - c) Commandments from sister or father
 - d) Laws from the government.
 - i) And while the laws and rules and commandments may be different,
 - (1) and sometimes they may even contradict,
 - ii) we are told that as long as we follow them
 - (1) and do not cross the lines we will be safe.
- 3) And who here could disagree? Certainly not the Pharisee in this morning's gospel.
 - a) Now when we hear the word *Pharisee*,
 - b) we hear it through 2,000 years of Christian tradition -
 - i) a tradition in which the Pharisees are almost always the bad guys.
- 4) But if we had the opportunity to speak to almost anyone in Jesus' day,
 - a) they would say that the Pharisees were the good guys!
- 5) They were a new movement in Judaism;

- a) a movement which taught that people could be good;
 - i) They could be holy;
 - ii) They could be pleasing in God's eyes,
 - (1) Not just when they went to the temple and offered sacrifices,
 - (2) But every day by following God's commandments.
- 6) That is why the Pharisee was in the temple;
 - a) He had come to give God thanks for the rules; because he followed them.
 - b) He was not greedy or dishonest or adulterous;
 - c) He tithed, he fasted twice a week,
 - d) And did all these things so He would not cross the lines,
 - e) And be, well, like them - you know -
 - i) like that tax collector who was standing over by the door.
- 7) Now when we hear the name *tax collector*;
 - a) while none of us think of taxes as necessarily positive;
 - b) We never really understand why tax collectors
 - i) Are always listed with prostitutes and sinners in the Bible.
 - c) It is because they collected taxes for the Romans,
 - d) Who were dirty unclean pagans who did not follow God's rules.
 - i) And thus by working for them,
 - ii) The tax collectors had crossed the line and were now no better than them.
- 8) To anyone listening in Jesus' day; and let's be honest, anyone listening in ours;
 - a) The Pharisee was the good guy; he followed the rules, and kept within the lines
 - i) He would have never been caught talking to foreigners, eating in their homes, walking in their neighborhoods.
- 9) To anyone listening in Jesus' day, and let's be honest, anyone listening in ours,
 - a) The tax collector was the bad guy;
 - i) And many of us would say he deserved whatever he got for being such a traitor;
 - (1) After all he broke the rules and crossed those lines.
- 10) But what if what the tax collector deserved was to be justified by God?
- 11) And what if it was the tax collector who was condemned?
 - a) For that is what Jesus says at the end of his shocking story.
 - i) Not because following the rules is bad and breaking them is good;
 - ii) Nor because crossing the lines is bad and staying within them is good.
- 12) But simply because the tax collector and Jesus knew something that all too often we and the Pharisees forget:
 - a) That in a world as big as ours;
 - i) That sometimes you can't help but break the rules and cross the lines
 - ii) Sometimes you have to work for people you don't want to,
 - (1) simply to put food on the table
 - iii) Sometimes you have to deal with people your mother told you to stay away from,
 - (1) Because they are in trouble or need your help
 - (2) Or simply because they are the ones who just moved in next door.
 - iv) Sometimes ya gotta go into Bensonhurst to get a good deal on a car;

- (1) even though you know you are not welcome.
 - b) That is why the Pharisee went home unjustified before God
 - i) Not because he did not follow the rules;
 - (1) But because he believed the rules were all you needed.
 - c) That is why the tax collector, sinner though he was, went home justified
 - i) Not because he did follow the rules
 - (1) But because he knew that no one could;
 - ii) and thus knew he needed something more than the rules.
 - iii) He needed the one who would be forgiving of him even when he broke the rules; and who would give him the strength to try again.
 - d) And that is why Jesus, who was the only one who could follow he rules, was killed by those who could not;
 - i) Because he revealed the truth about their lives, an about ours.
 - (1) Because If all we needed were the rules, then we would not need baptism, we would not need confession, we would not need grace or the sacraments or even Jesus himself. The rules would be enough to justify us.
 - (2) But they are never enough; and the humiliation that comes from realizing that is one line that the tax collector crossed, but the Pharisee couldn't; and it was the line that made all the difference.
 - (a) For it taught the tax collector to put his faith in God, an only then in the rules.
- 13) For it is a strange thing about rules;
- a) Over time they change.
 - i) In fact the reason why the case of Yusuf Hawkins was mentioned in the Times was because Bensonhurst, for years a symbol of bigotry and exclusion, is now home to one of the most diverse communities in New York; Asians, Russians, Hispanics, even blacks now live in the homes where twenty years ago families who rioted against Al Sharpton's presence in their neighborhood lived.
 - ii) The simple fact that such things are possible, that lines can shift, rules can blur an the things we once thought were so simple can become suddenly so complex
 - (1) Should cause us to take a moment and listen to the tax collector's prayer.
And pray it ourselves.
 - (2) And toput our faith not in the rules, but in the one who guides us through them.
 - (3) Because when all else is done; we need the humility of the tax collector
 - (4) Which recognizes that the rules are never enough.
 - (5) Only God is.