

DINING WITH REPUBLICANS
October 27, 2013 –Matthew 9: 9-13
The Church of the Covenant

DINING WITH REPUBLICANS is a sermon about Jesus' ability to reach out and to identify with people who were broken, or those whom the world rejected, and claim them for the Kingdom. It is a message for His Church, those of us who seek to follow in the steps of the Master. By the way it has nothing to do with politics, so you can relax!

I was serving the church out in Hickory and made a decision to marry two people who were divorced. This was deemed incorrect by some of the holy people of Hickory. A small town is great when they love you; but its hell on earth if they decide to turn on you. The preacher shouldn't have agreed to marry these folks, so the good people said; the divorced couple should have been called before the Session and "sessioned", knelt before the session, admitted their wrong and begged for forgiveness. Nope. So they chose to criticize me and call me an unholy preacher. The fickleness of public opinion is amazing, and if I may say, in every town or city in which I have served over the years, regardless of size, I have watched people turn and tear down people they once supported and loved. I chose to ignore it. But the storm just got larger and larger and people started criticizing me for a whole host of things.

So a man in that congregation, C.V. Cowden, called me on the phone and invited me to lunch. He was a saintly man, highly regarded in that town. He would say: *"Every saint has a past and every sinner has a future."* He was a regular volunteer at Serenity Farms. The restaurant was The Hickory Hollow Restaurant, where the elite meet to eat and greet. I kept that place in business; it was always one of those CHEERS moments when I entered, everyone would turn and say "Stu!" and the waitress would run over and pour me a cup of coffee without asking. You know you eat in a restaurant too much when you announce you're leaving the church they host a farewell party for you, entitled, "Stu's Last Supper". You know you eat in a restaurant too much when you actually do leave town the restaurant goes out of business because 20% of its business just left! But it was always full at lunchtime. The elite of that little town always present to corrode their arteries with something delicious and fatty. And to gnaw on the town gossip a bit, too. C.V. had requested the center table at HIGH NOON. And he entered with me and we greeted everyone in the restaurant, by name of course, and he made quite a show of being with me. Finally, at one point, C.V. stood up, and clinked his knife on his water glass and said, "May I have your attention?" And the restaurant got real quiet, sort of like when E.F. Hutton is about to speak. And C.V. said: "This man is my preacher and I love him and am proud of him. And I don't care who knows it." And then he sat down. I will just say that all the criticism of me dissipated as the dew on a sunny morning and I will be grateful to the day I die to my dear friend and brother in Christ, C.V. Cowden. He has gone on to be with the Lord but I look forward to the day when I get to sit down with him at that heavenly banquet spread by our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, and for eternity..."This man, C.V., is my friend and my brother who stood with me at a tough time and I love him and I don't care who knows it."

Our Bible story from the Gospel of Matthew begins with Jesus calling the tax collector, "Matthew"; tax collectors called in the King James Version of the Bible, "publicans". Matthew must have been utterly shocked that Jesus came to him at all because good Jews didn't associate with publicans. They were deemed flawed and sinful, to be rejected by good people as unworthy sinners. So Jesus reaching out to Matthew is a VERY big deal. So Jesus comes up to this publican and sinner and says: *"Follow me."* (Matthew 9: 9) and immediately the tax collector leaves all the money on his tax collector table behind and follows the Master. Jesus always calls us just where we are and just as I am in order to draw us just where HE is and to make us just as He is. And then Jesus compounds matters by sitting and supping

with Matthew and other publicans and people whom the world deemed sinners. Sharing a meal with someone was viewed in that culture as the ultimate acceptance. It was reserved for close family and friends, and it was an outward sign of full acceptance of the person with whom one ate. If you will, Jesus was DINING WITH PUBLICANS (sorry for the bad pun in my sermon!). Shocking! Arresting! Why I thought Jesus was a HOLY person, maybe even a prophet sent from God! But HE associates with the wrong people. And then is thrown in the face of Jesus and the disciples the criticism that the good and holy people of that time threw at Jesus – “*Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners? What does your Master eat with publicans and sinners?*” (Matthew 9: 11) Jesus will hang out with people the rest of the world reject. Jesus will even sit at table and eat with them. Jesus accepts them. Jesus reaches out to them like no other good people will. Jesus embraces them. Jesus identifies with them. Jesus is willing to be criticized even for hanging out with them. These are my family and my intimates declares Jesus by how HE sups with them. Jesus’ response to the criticism is this: “*I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.*” (Matthew 9: 13) If you think you’re already righteous and holy on your own, then you don’t need me, says Jesus. If you don’t think you’re sick you don’t need me as the Great Physician. But if you know that you’re inherently sinful and fallen and that you need a Savior to save you and a Lord to follow, then, “Come, follow me.” I will be with you; I will sit and sup with you; I will identify with you; I will love you JUST AS YOU ARE into the Kingdom of God, if you let me.

Years later I serve a church in Des Moines, Iowa and a man in that congregation who is a prominent lawyer in town and an elected member of the school board gets himself into trouble. Honestly, it doesn’t matter what the trouble is, does it? Well, if he was right then you should support him but if he was wrong you should avoid him. I don’t abide by that; I think the task of the church is to support people in the midst of their troubles and trials regardless of whether they are found out to be wrong or right. Its always amazing to me how people run the other way when someone gets themselves into trouble! So I am praying about it and I remember what C.V. Cowden did for me. So I invite this man to the Des Moines Club for lunch at HIGH NOON. The Des Moines Club was a club I was expected to be a member of as pastor of that church. It had picture of prominent state Republicans on the walls and I always referred to it as “Dining with Republicans”. And I request the table in the very center of the club room. And at one point I stand up and clink my glass. And I say, “May I have your attention, please?” And the club sort of got real quiet like when E.F. Hutton was about to speak. And remembering what was said over me years before I said, “This man is my friend and my brother and I care for him and support him. And I don’t care who knows it.” And I sat down to stunned silence. It should not shock you that the man’s difficulties and his “trial in the court of public opinion” soon faded. He was restored to his rightful place as a respected member of that community and active member of our church.

This past week I had lunch with a minister here in Washington who just got his name negatively in the paper recently. I took him to the Union Grille, where the elite meet to eat and greet. (By the way, where a lot of prominent Democrats have their pictures on the wall!) I supported him and I prayed with him and I introduced him around to people I know. But I didn’t clink my glass; maybe I’ve mellowed a bit over time. But he knew and they knew who was my friend and brother. And I don’t care who knows it. Beloved, when we as the church of Jesus Christ stand united and identify with those whom the world rejects, has deemed flawed or failed, who are the publicans and sinners of today’s world, then the GREAT PHYSICIAN will come, and Jesus will heal that person, and restore that person, and give that person a future filled with hope. C.V. Cowden always said: “Every saint has a past and every sinner has a future” and with Jesus, the hope of the world, that is always so. And I don’t care who knows it. Amen.

*By: The Reverend Dr. Stuart D. Broberg, The Church of the Covenant, Washington, PA
IF THIS HAS BLESSED YOU, PLEASE PASS IT ALONG TO A FRIEND!*