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First Friday
News & Views

ONCE UPON A TIME

by Jonathan Wilson

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CALENDAR

▼ The next FFBC meeting is 7:00 A.M., Friday, February 4, 2011 at Hoyt Sherman Place.

R.S.V.P. by February 1 to JonathanWilson@davisbrownlaw.com or 288-2500 by phone.

Once upon a time there was a Lutheran Church smitten with the idea that religious discrimination is wrong. So smitten, in fact, that the church members resolved to raise money and give it away in the form of scholarships for Iowa high school students who had distinguished themselves by doing things to expose and reduce religious discrimination in their schools and communities. These scholarships were given to students regardless of their religious denominational affiliations. Tens of thousands of dollars were raised and given away in scholarships for Roman Catholic students, Lutheran students, United Methodist students, Episcopalians, Baptists, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, you-name-it. Even a couple of avowed atheists who were somewhat confused on the whole subject of religion, got scholarships. The program was a remarkable success, it gained recognition throughout the state of Iowa, and it helped expand the population of Iowans who oppose religious discrimination.

Membership in the Lutheran Church was limited, of course, to Lutherans. Anyone could attend the Lutheran Church services, but to be eligible for election to the church council or to serve as one of its officers or ministers, or to organize and administer its scholarship program, a person had to be a Lutheran.

There happened to be some Buddhists living in the same city. They observed the good works of the Lutheran Church through its scholarship program. They were impressed by the success of the program and how it appeared to have reduced religious discrimination throughout the state of Iowa. They wanted to be a part of that success, so they went to the Lutheran Church pastor and asked if they could participate *and be eligible for election to the Lutheran Church council*. The pastor gently informed them that, without being a Lutheran, they would not be eligible to be elected to the church council. They could give to the scholarship program if they believed in its purpose; they could participate in raising money for the program, and they could attend the Lutheran Church services. They could even establish a Buddhist temple or a non-denominational church in the city and sponsor a scholarship program of their own. But only Lutherans were eligible for election to the Lutheran Church council, or to be a church officer or its pastor.

The Buddhists took offense. They chose not to form a Buddhist Temple or a non-denominational church that might replicate the good work of the Lutheran Church. Instead, they accused the Lutheran Church of discrimination. They denounced the scholarship program, and they called upon Iowa high school students to boycott the Lutheran Church scholarship program. And the Lutheran Church kept right on doing its good work.

Once upon a time there also was a gay / bisexual *men's* breakfast club . . .

Message from self-styled Christians: *Whether you're in a committed, monogamous, same-gender relation, or utterly promiscuous with people of the same gender, it's a moral equivalent.*



Elizabeth Dilley

By Bruce Carr

Our speaker on January 7 was the Rev. Elizabeth Dilley, pastor of the First Congregational United Church of Christ in Red Oak, Iowa, who shared with us her progressive and extremely welcome ideas on sexuality and spirituality. A long-time student of smaller congregations, Dilley came to First Congregational (already then an Open and Affirming church!) seven years ago from Berkeley, California; in addition to her church work, she is a part-time health educator with Planned Parenthood of the Heartland, where she works with people of all ages to promote healthy life and sexual choices.

Dilley spoke with passion and humility -- and humor: "I work both for Jesus and for Planned Parenthood," she noted. She recounted her pleasure at encountering "Iowa Nice" when she first came to the Midwest: the local fundamentalist preacher never fails to greet her peaceably at the grocery store, to work with her effectively on professional committees and projects -- no matter that he may think (and preach) that she and her flock are blasphemers.

"The basic problem," she said, "is that we all grow up learning the message that sex is dirty and wrong -- so you should save it for the one you love." Her own message is embodied in this prayer: "In Christ, our bodies have been renewed in love and you, O God, bless all that we do in love and compassion and mutuality. Sexuality is a good gift that you call us to share -- from the tender caress of a loving partner to the ecstasy of orgasm which opens up new vistas of passionate life. Help us to love extravagantly, to live fully, and to embrace the bodies of all your people upon the earth, that their needs -- arising from hunger to pleasure, leading to loneliness and overstimulation, the result of resistance and exploitation -- may be met in Christ and in the community to which Christ calls us, the embodiment of your love on earth. Amen."

Dilley earned a B.S. in Educational Theatre from New York University and her M. Div. from Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley in 2003. She clearly thrives on teaching: last summer she returned to her alma mater to give a course she titled "Size Always Matters: Spirituality, Leadership, and Administration in the Smaller Membership Church." Ya gotta love her. Her husband, Paul Richardson, obviously does, and they are about to become parents later this year.

Like all good preachers, Dilley is also a poet. Here's another prayer, from her sermon "Preaching and Praying about Sexuality" published in the *Clergy for Choice Newsletter* last April:

A Prayer For Our Bodies

(feel free to use part or all of this in your own congregations and communities of faith)

We thank you, God, for the gift of our bodies and all that they can do.

Our hands reach out in love,



Message from God: *Sex is dirty; so I wouldn't want it used to procreate a Son.*

caressing the other with compassion
releasing our tight hold on possessions
touching the earth you have made
nurturing new life into being

Our lips press against the things of this world,
kissing our beloved gently
tasting the food before us
offering up words of affirmation and love

Our hearts beat a rhythm of life into the universe,
swelling in love and joy
propelling us to action

Don't Ask—Don't Tell

By Jonathan Wilson

The Don't Ask -- Don't Tell policy, that was put in place under Bill Clinton's time as Commander-in-Chief, was inherently flawed and was paraded out as a supposed compromise. It was no compromise in the sense intended. Instead, it adopted as official Pentagon policy what had been going on in the United States military since its inception; so long as gay soldiers stayed in the closet and didn't get caught, they were welcome to serve their country, sacrificing and even dying for the freedoms of others. By making that the official policy, it implicitly denigrated gay service members, but worse, told the world that any suspected gay soldier was unusually vulnerable to blackmail. Whatever secret is necessary to preserve a career -- any career -- makes the keeper of the secret an easy target for anyone who learns the secret. The policy, therefore, and undeniably, was a compromise all right -- a compromise of our national security.

There have always been gay members of our military, serving -- showering -- side-by-side with other soldiers. Coming out of the closet doesn't change that, nor does it make more likely that a gay soldier will hit on a straight comrade.

The effort to repeal the policy, when attached to the Pentagon's proposed budget, appeared to have died an agonizing death. But, like Jesus, it rose from the dead on its own and passed easily in both houses of the lame-duck Congress and was signed by the President. Just like that. Remarkable. It demonstrates that there will inevitably be daily ups and downs in the civil rights struggle, but the trend line and progress are unmistakable and accelerating. In my life time it will be a non-issue. In my life time same gender marriage will be the law of the land. In many respects it's all over but the shouting. And the command structure of the military will insure its success. I can still hear my drill sergeant shouting orders in army Basic Training, requiring trainees to do all sorts of things that ran against the grain. The philosophy underlying the military command structure presupposes that soldiers can be trained to do whatever they're told -- even to the point of dying on a foreign battlefield for some ill-defined mission with a tenuous connection to our national defense. That, in my mind, makes the prospect of getting gay and straight soldiers to share a warm shower almost like child's play.

News is the first rough draft of history. Ben Bradlee

I Love You Phillip Morris

Review by Gary Kaufman

Steven Russell (Jim Carrey) discovered as a young boy that he had been adopted. His parents told him that he was special because they had chosen him. The two people he thought were his parents had put money in a brown bag and given it to his real mother in the hospital parking lot. His reaction to this news was that he was going to be the best person he could be. As an adult he played the organ in church; he became a policeman; he got married and had a beautiful baby daughter; and he prayed at night next to the bed with his adoring wife. He was living the American Dream, except that it was all a lie – he was gay.

Then, surviving a severe auto accident suddenly changed all that, and he decided that if he lived he was going to live his life the way he wanted to. He wanted to be “the real me!” Not only was he gay, he was South Palm Beach gay. He had a lover, and dressed in gaudy expensive outfits. He soon discovered, however, that to be gay and live the lifestyle that he wanted to live, was very expensive. He became a con artist to support his lifestyle. Like most con artists, eventually all his lies caught up with him, and he was thrown into a Texas prison. There he met the true love of his life, Philip Morris (Ewan McGregor).

This has to be one of the most unusual gay love stories portrayed in film. It is actually based on a true story; although I’m sure some artistic license was used to add some details. It was quite sweet to see Steven and Philip woo each other in prison. Steven as the con artist seemed to adjust really well in prison and got away with things that ordinary people could not.

I was initially apprehensive about seeing a movie with Jim Carrey portraying a gay man; I thought it would be so over-the-top that it would be insulting. But he was fine and carried it off really well. Ewan McGregor was absolutely fabulous as the love-struck, emotional, clueless paramour. He transformed himself from the flamboyant dark-haired macho man I remember him in **Moulin Rouge**, to this beautiful blond-haired, blue-eyed, mild-mannered boy. He was very caring and loving and, unfortunately, too believing in his sweetheart lover.

So it is a coming out story coupled with a bit of absurdity. Probably not the best film of the holiday season, but definitely worth a look-see.

Dan Savage: *For anyone who claims to believe that gay men can actually become ex-gay men, I have just one question for you: Would you want your daughter to marry one?*

Dan Savage: *Gay activist is a term evangelicals apply to any homosexual who isn't a gay doormat.*

My M. O. (cont from page 4)

by Steve Person

Another fascinating book that came out recently is actually 100 years old. **Autobiography of Mark Twain, Volume 1**, is a huge work that Twain dictated from his bed in Hartford, Connecticut, more than 100 years ago. He stipulated that it could not be published until 100 years after his death. The enormity of the work is misleading. The introduction to the book takes up the first 200 pages, and the explanatory notes at the end take up 210 pages. In between are Twain’s own words. I chose just to read the author and not the introduction and explanatory notes. I found that Twain explains everything satisfactorily on his own, but the narrative does skip back and forth in time. I think I will take on Volumes 2 and 3 when they come out of CD!

Bruce Carr of The First Friday Breakfast Club: *Any virile young man who can't rebuff a sexual pass from a homo without giving it another thought had better wonder about his own str8tness [and toughness].*

BRIEFS & SHORTS

Be sure to RSVP for the February 4 meeting no later than February 1. E-mail JonathanWilson@davisbrownlaw.com or call him at 288-2500. Our speaker will be the Wayne Besen, Executive Director of Truth Wins Out.



Save the date: The Red Party fundraiser will be February 4, 2011, with special guest Wayne Besen, Executive Director of Truth Wins Out (TWO), a national organization that tracks and challenges folks involved in ex-gay “ministry.” Wayne will be at our regular meeting that day and at the party.



Be sure to peruse the front table for a book you might like to read. Book donations are always welcome. Thanks to Fred Mount for taking over the book table.



Thanks to Allen Vander Linden for his introduction of our January speaker, the Reverend Elizabeth Dille of First Congregational United Church of Christ in Red Oak, Iowa.



A vacancy on the FFBC Board of Directors has been created by the resignation of David Teachout. The Board will appoint a member to complete his term of office. Any member with an interest in serving on the Board should make that known to a Board member.



Reflections on Christmas

By Jonathan Wilson

The Biblical story is told that God impregnated an unmarried girl, Mary, who subsequently gave birth to Jesus. Jesus grew in wisdom, in stature, and in favor with God and man. He went into ministry for about three years; traipsing around the countryside and occasionally on water with eleven good friends and one especially good friend; preaching (with precious little hard evidence) that God is loving and merciful, and not vengeful as depicted in the Old Testament. He managed to get cross-wise with the religious and governmental establishment of the time, was crucified (to pay for sins not yet committed by people not yet born), died, and was buried, only to rise again from the dead and ascend physically into Heaven. There you have it in a nutshell. If one buys into the beginning of the story, it's as easy to believe in all the rest.

With a belief in those particulars, selfless compassion has been shown around the world, wonderful music has been written and sung, and innocents have been slaughtered in countless numbers. To say that the account of his birth, life, and death requires a suspension of our life experience would be an understatement. To say that the account and human history since are filled with paradoxes would likewise be an understatement. Today, self-styled Christians who worship the Prince of Peace are among the most ardent supporters of a strong military, perpetuation of war in Iraq and Afghanistan, and forgiveness of torture admittedly committed at Gitmo and elsewhere in our name.

There are some elements of the story's beginning that are seldom discussed. For example, the impregnation of Mary was by all accounts non-consensual. Oh sure, after the fact she was informed and graciously accepted her fate, but she was not consulted in advance. By today's standards, that is an assault if not rape. It gives full voice to the line from an old hymn, "Time makes ancient good uncouth." That we can today celebrate the event is, at least, paradoxical and at worst the acceptance of an unprosecutable felony.

It also stands for the perennial proposition that there is something lesser about the way the rest of us came into the world. It gives implicit expression to the admonition that sex is dirty so save it for someone you love and marry.

On the brighter side, especially for folks in the gay/lesbian community, the impregnation of Mary and the

birth of Jesus, represent one of the first recorded examples of a surrogate arrangement. Use that on critics when we pursue alternatives to marrying unsuspecting straight people as a means to become loving parents.

A Tax By Any Other Name

By Jonathan Wilson

Raising taxes is obviously not popular no matter how much the revenues are needed. Political types try to avoid doing things that will be seen as a tax increase. They do things like "close a loop hole." That's nothing more or less than raising the taxes on whomever it was that was enjoying that particular loop hole.

Even those who cultivate a reputation for not raising taxes are guilty. Take Ronald Reagan, for example. To this day he is reputed for opposing tax increases. Yet it was on his watch that the deduction was eliminated for interest payments on debt. If you take away a deduction, the bottom line tax liability goes up. Taxes raised. Simple as that.

Now get this: on October 15, 2010, the Federal Reserve announced that it was prepared to take new action to boost the economy. FED Chairman, Ben Bernanke was quoted as saying that "inflation has been too low of late." Shortly thereafter the FED bought \$600 billion in US Treasuries, intending to trigger some inflation – a "tax" on people with fixed incomes and/or savings accounts. The problem was that at about the same time the Euro tanked because of the need to bail out Ireland, so the US dollar actually strengthened in international markets. But the FED is committed and has announced the intention to do the same thing again until the "desired" level of inflation is achieved.

Inflation has its virtues to be sure. It lowers the cost of US goods overseas creating more demand, and that creates jobs. It makes it cheaper to repay US debt to China and others. But make no mistake, those "worthy" objectives are purchased on the backs of those who are "taxed" by inflation.



If you're not making dust, you'll probably find yourself eating dust.

H. L. Mencken: *Faith – an illogical belief in the occurrence of the improbable.*

Rants & Raves

By Gary Kaufman

FOUND MONEY SPENT QUICKLY

Did anyone notice that before the election the Iowa Republicans accused the Democrats and Governor Culver of terrible fiscal mismanagement and stated that the Democrats were driving the state nearly into bankruptcy? Then, after the election and the Republicans have won, they now mysteriously find a \$300M “surplus” in the state coffers? Do these so-called fiscal conservatives put this state money away for a rainy day? No! The money isn’t even in the bank, and they already have corralled it into a “tax relief” fund and have stated they intend to give it all away to corporations in the form of tax breaks. This is apparently to fulfill a campaign promise of Governor Branstad. Coincidentally, these corporations now have, under the rulings of our fine U. S. Supreme Court, recently won the right, formerly reserved only for human beings, to spend unlimited amounts on political campaigns. So now these corporations can spend all this extra money to ensure the re-election of the politicians that give them all that extra money.

Is this really the type of government Iowans thought they were getting when they elected a new governor and new representatives of the people? Fellow Iowans, I think we better think this through again! Some have claimed that corporations are going to be taking over our governments. Perhaps it has already happened, and we are too dumb to realize it.

TAX COMPROMISE – A BREACH OF FAITH

I am not one that will hail the tax compromise President Obama obtained in the lame duck session of Congress. I had been a supporter of Obama since he gave that initial speech at Hilton Coliseum in the early part of his campaign. I believed in what he had to say. He said that those like Bill Gates did not need income tax breaks. I expected him to live up to his word. But instead, he extended the Bush tax cuts to millionaires. Not only is this a betrayal of trust to the left, but it should also be considered one to the right as well. If the Tea Partiers were really fiscal conservatives, the last thing the government should do when it is bleeding red ink is give money away to people who don’t need it. It should be used to pay the debts the government owes. But instead the fiscal leak is just allowed to continue to flow.

The tax compromise was also a breach of faith for those who think the government should ensure that Social Security is there when we need it. Social Security is

something that should be made actuarially sound by making slight adjustments to the three legs that support it: increase the tax rate slightly, increase the retirement age slightly, and raise the salary cap a little. By a little tweaking on each leg, it would be made sound, and most people would not even notice the change. But politicians draw the line on one of the three legs, and that makes the other parts make up the difference. But what does the great compromise do – it reduces the funding of Social Security by a third! Yes, their solution or solving something that is actuarially unsound is to dramatically reduce its funding. Perhaps their thinking is that politicians only solve problems when they are in crisis mode, so this will ensure that crisis mode will come sooner rather than later. Whatever it is, it makes no sense. Those on the left have been betrayed into thinking their government will look out for the old in our country, and those on the right have been betrayed in the expectation that the government is to be fiscally sound.

Even worse is how this has all played out in the media. “You’ll have more money to spend!” it was announced on CNN. Which is, of course, what their advertisers would like you to do with it. But the lack of fiscal responsibility in our government is becoming absolutely appalling!

Reflections on Democracy and Palin

By Jonathan Wilson

Sarah Palin has taken umbrage at suggestions that her “lock-n-load” and “don’t retreat-but-reload instead” comments, coupled with her targeting Giffords’s re-election race with gun-sight cross hairs, may have contributed to the Tucson massacre. Let’s see now. We live in a democracy. Democracy requires the protected right to free expression. **The right of free expression in a democracy is intended to let competing views be expressed *for the purpose of influencing people who hear the expressed views and getting them to take some kind of action in response.*** The principle underlying democracy itself is the belief that expressed views *will* influence those who hear them. Given Palin’s undenied comments using weapons as metaphors (at least), she can’t escape the consequences. If she believes in democracy, as I’m sure she’d say she does, she cannot simultaneously claim that she did not contribute to the environment that spawned the violence.

The problem with old age is that there’s not much future in it.

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*First Friday
News & Views
Des Moines, Iowa*

FEBRUARY 2011

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My M.O. (Monthly Observations)

Grant's Wood(y)

Steve Person

Last winter the Des Moines Art Center mounted an exhibition entitled, "After Many Springs: Regionalism, Modernism & the Midwest." The centerpiece of the exhibit was Grant Wood's **American Gothic**, on loan from the Chicago Institute of Art. I was amazed upon seeing this most famous of American paintings by being so close to it that I could have reached out and touched it if such an act would have been acceptable. Unfortunately, I missed much of the painting because of my own ignorance.

Enter R. Tripp Evans's new biography, **Grant Wood: a Life**. I wish the book had been available before I went to see this exhibition. Evans asserts, "Countless profiles of the artist in the 1930s celebrated his very ordinariness as the source of his work's appeal. For these critics, Wood's life and imagery appeared to reflect the values of a similarly unassuming, and now vanished, rural American Golden Age—a period untainted by the complexities and strident individualism of the modern world....Critics in our own time have often perpetuated this two-dimensional image of the artist, yet even the most cursory investigation of Wood's life calls into question its supposedly uncomplicated character....Finally, we must reconcile this apparent paragon of such 'heartland' values as civic virtue and traditional Christian morality with a man who often bristled at small-town life, belonged to no church, and spent most of his life masking—not always successfully—his homosexuality."

Like Leonardo's **Mona Lisa**, **American Gothic** opens itself up to myriad interpretations, not to mention endless parodies. Indeed, if you're looking for a fun experience in rural Iowa, drive to the southeastern town of Eldon where the **American Gothic** house is located. A warm and friendly visitor center has been built near the house, and visitors can even dress up in clothes similar to those in the painting (pitchfork included) and be photographed in front of the house.

Some felt the painting was a slap in the face to rural Iowa; others saw in it an attack by Wood on his parents. Art Critic Robert Hughes wrote, "**American Gothic** is the expression of a gay sensibility so cautious that it can hardly bring itself to mock its subjects openly." Whatever the interpretation one gives to the painting, the life of its creator is endlessly fascinating, and his works both before and after **American Gothic** reveal secrets of the artist's closeted life that I would never have guessed before reading Evans's book. **Stone City**, perhaps Wood's most famous Iowa landscape, reveals in the undulating hills well-rounded male buttocks that I had overlooked until I read Evans's interpretation. Evans goes on to analyze each of Wood's paintings with similar exactitude and opens an entire new way of looking at the artist's works.

(See My M. O., page 3)

The government should be less concerned about what folks are doing in the bedroom and more concerned about what they're doing on the rifle range.
