

One New Book for the Preacher

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Will Willimon, *Who Lynched Willie Earle?* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 2016)

With an amazing new book, Will Willimon has given us preachers something invaluable. For years Will has been turning out books, articles, sermons, and commentaries to help us. Next to Walter Brueggemann and Barbara Brown Taylor, he is the most prolific writer of good theological insights to assist us in proclaiming the Gospel and living as disciples of Jesus Christ. After the election of Donald Trump, I needed help. I needed help to figure out my responsibility as a pastor after a horribly contentious election of a President who seems to deny many of the primary values of the Christian faith. (Will has reminded me that Trump claims to be a Presbyterian—John Calvin is spinning!) Seriously, Will and I have been colleagues and friends in Durham for thirty years. I have great respect for him as a committed disciple of Jesus Christ. So I am not surprised by the sound theology and timeliness of this book

Will and I both have South Carolina roots, having been educated in school and college in the Palmetto State in the 1960s. It was a society that was rigidly segregated. And we are both preachers who believe that God is calling us to change ourselves and our culture. The horrific killing of the Mother Emanuel Nine on June 17, 2015, led Will to write this book. On that same day, I accepted the call to be transitional pastor at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina, down Meeting Street from Emanuel AME Church. It was a call that I had not sought or expected, but it has given me the opportunity to seek to help a community grieve a tragic expression of racial hatred and to experience the response to such hate by people of deep faith shaped by the power of God's love.

This book has been written “for such a time as this.” I felt it personally as I struggled to figure out my baptism vocation as a citizen and disciple of Jesus Christ after the 2016 election. I have felt like a “resident alien” since the election of Donald Trump. One of the most distressing aspects of Trump's campaign was the explicit racism. Even more troubling is the fact that this did not disqualify Trump among many who seek to follow Christ. To make matters worse, despite the talk of a post-racist America, right below the surface, racism is alive and well. Now it has surfaced in the rhetoric of Trump which gives license to bullying, bigotry, and hate. We are being called to face it from the pulpit and in our congregations.

Will and I were privileged to have as a neighbor and colleague Dr. John Hope Franklin, who taught at Duke University until retirement. He was one of our most distinguished and insightful historians as well as an amazing human being. Among his many outstanding books is *The Color Line* in which he encouraged us to face the racism so deeply ingrained in our society. This is necessary, he wrote, to keep the color line from being “a most important legacy of the twenty-first century.” In 1993, Franklin wrote:

Perhaps the first thing we need to do as a nation and as individual members of society is to confront our past and see it for what it is. It is a past that is filled with some of the ugliest possible examples of racial brutality in human history. We need to recognize it for what it was and is and not explain it away, excuse it, or justify it. Having done that, we should then make a good-faith effort to turn our history around so that we can see it in front of us.

Will begins by doing just that with a painful account of how he as a college student was confronted with a lynching of a black man, Willie Earle, by whites in his hometown in 1947. It is an all too familiar story. This murder, as well as the unjust trial and acquittal of those who did it, was kept secret. At the age of thirty, I also had a professor at Florida State University inform me of a horrific incident perpetrated against a black woman in Live Oak, Florida, a small town where I grew up. He gave me a book by William Bradford Huie that gave an account of the troubling story of Ruby McCollum, which took place on the street where I lived. No one ever talked about it. Dig deep enough into the common life of our communities, and there are hidden tales of woe about the “lynching” of African Americans.

Will encourages us to do some truth telling. Because in the matter of race, as we often say in the liturgical call to confession, “We are self-deceived and strangers to the truth.” It is clear that there is conventional wisdom that if we do not talk about the racism so ingrained in our culture and our lives, it will not exist. So confession is essential. I am impressed by Will’s honesty about his own struggle to face honestly and to confess his own racism. The book recounts a very courageous sermon preached by a Methodist pastor, Harley Lynn, in response to the lynching of Willie Earle. There are other insightful examples of sermons preached about the sin of racism. Will not only encourages us to preach faithful sermons, but also “to talk about it” in sermons and our Common life.

It is important to “speak the truth in love” about our horrendous racial past. This is not to wallow in guilt, but it is, as John Hope Franklin wrote, a major step towards creating space where true reconciliation can happen. The good news is that this task is not something we must accomplish on our own. The major theological point Will makes is that God is at work to make reconciliation a reality and wants us to engage in this work of God’s kingdom. Will strongly believes that preaching is a significant way God has chosen to get the job done.

Preaching is important, but it is not enough. Will suggests we may not be able to keep the 11 o’clock hour on Sunday from being the most segregated hour of the week. But it is also crucial to engage in honest conversations with brothers and sisters in Christ in which we white folks listen to how African Americans experience racism in their daily lives. This is hard work, but it is essential if we are going to move towards what Dr. Martin Luther King called the Beloved Community. In my experience, incredible things start happening when congregations of different races take the risk of talking together and building honest relationships. This takes time and requires commitment, but it is well worth the effort.

I strongly recommend this book. Don’t take my word for it. Read the article by Will Willimon, “Resurrection and the Courage to Confront Racism,” in this issue of *Journal for Preachers*, and I believe you will want more.