

William Willimon. *Who Lynched Willie Earle: Preaching to Confront Racism*. Abingdon, 2017. 138 pages. \$17.99.

Will Willimon's latest volume provides a fresh homiletic primer on preaching and racism. The first forty percent of the book is devoted to a gripping reconstruction of a 1947 act of racial terrorism followed by an assessment of "one of the most courageous sermons ever preached in South Carolina Methodism" (23-33).

The second portion of the book settles into a writing style familiar to the Willimon oeuvre as he examines ways that preaching can confront racism in today's church. Working with realities like "race is a myth" while "racism is a fact" (55) and that white possession of power makes racism all the more pernicious, Willimon meshes a biblical theology with recent sermon samples that address systemic racism in the wake of the killings of Walter Scott, Michael Brown and especially the massacre at Mother Emmanuel AME in Charleston. Christian preaching, Willimon claims, begins "not with astute sociological analysis of the human condition, but rather with scripture" (99). Thus, racism is our specific Christian problem "because of the God we are attempting to worship and obey" (61).

As a self-described "older white Southern male" (xiii), Willimon finds that little progress has been made against racism during his four decades in ministry, "The battle lines have shifted, white supremacist sentiment has morphed, and my church is more segregated than ever" (xiii). Armed with the lifelong conviction that white Christians have work to do and in subservience to a relentlessly redemptive God "who wrenches good out of our bad through a weapon called preaching" (xiv), Willimon retains a surprisingly optimistic view of the efficacy of preaching, especially given the dismal record he claims for the church during his era.

This is a fine work. An excellent opening foray for first year preaching students and an engaging introductory volume for ministers who desire to address the vexing concerns that continue to embed our churches and nation. Frankly, any volume that finds hope in the future of preaching while honestly addressing racism is a welcome addition.

The greatest strength of the book is not Willimon's personal connections to the 1947 events nor his exhortations and examples from his former Duke Divinity students. Rather, it is the horrific and honest description of Willie Earle's violent death and the "steam winder" sermon that Hawley Lynn preached just days after the event, which reveals the atrocity of the sin, often in the words of the culpable, and a sermonic response that embodies still the epitome of courage.

The most heuristic quality of the book, thus, is not the sermon samples and sage advice (helpful and welcome as they are) but the pathetic reality which Willimon confesses: that from 1947 to 2017, "White supremacist sentiment has morphed, and my church is more segregated than ever" (xiii).

How can this be? What can be said of preaching to give a reckoning for this reality? While evangelical pulpits have their hands full accounting for their silence in the current state of affairs, mainline Protestants must give account for the morphing, shifting, segregating systemic racism that continues to persist, seemingly immune to overtures from the mainline pulpit. Thus, Willimon's most recent book is an unfortunate missed opportunity; it begs for better work.

The better volume could lead from Willimon's career of sermons, not a vague confession of unnamed sins ("Hello, my name is Will, and I am a recovering racist," 79) which does little to advance the project before us. More helpful would be evaluations of Willimon's career of prophetic preaching, at the same critical level that he addresses the courageous Hawley Lynn

(rooted as he was in the American vision and without an articulated biblical theology) or John Piper, Sam Wells and the other white preachers he scrutinizes in this volume.

This sequel could advance his initial foray with depth, insight and perhaps a concrete model of reasons for repentance and a helpful way forward. For instance, Willimon recalls a lay leader at his first congregation, who after a sermon which called for expanded civil rights in Georgia, urged Will to “avoid politics” and “stick to saving souls” (66). That conversation revealed evidence of the “unconscious acquiescence of Southern Christians to white supremacy as a substitute for the Gospel” (66). True enough, but that same line of resistance continues to be thought and heard in countless white churches in America whenever racism is addressed. A close analysis from a career’s worth of prophetic sermons would uncover more than witty retorts, but an honesty grown from a local pastor’s life of preaching. We could learn much from Willimon’s critical reading of his own significant efforts.

In the meantime, *Who Lynched Willie Earle* is a primer worth our attention and should be employed while we await a volume that can assess this reality: that in lynching’s legacy of racial inequality, exemplified in the contamination of the integrity of America’s justice system, many of us preachers have kept a silence born from ignorance, an ignorance allowed and nurtured in white privilege. There is time to do more than repent, time perhaps to turn and forge a productive and biblical way forward. A preacher with Willimon’s heft and longevity can help us see, as Hawley Lynn did in the wake of Willie Earle’s violent death, that systemic racism in our society is like the air we breathe, it surrounds us and benefits us, and yet we see it not. How then do we preach?

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