

“Who Lynched Willie Earle? – A Question for the Church”

A Reflection for February from the Racial Justice Team’s 2025 Calendar
February 17th: The Anniversary of the Lynching of Willie Earle

In 2017 William Willimon, retired bishop in The United Methodist Church, and former dean of the Chapel at Duke University, wrote a short and accessible book entitled, “Who Lynched Willie Earle?” It is a book about a South Carolina pastor who in 1947 preached a sermon against the mob lynching of a black man called Willie Earle who was accused of killing a white taxi driver. The white preacher was called Hawley Lynn and he preached an anti-racism sermon about white privilege to his white congregation in a town that had just had a lynching, which most good Christians didn’t want to talk about (though many church goers actively attended lynchings in their towns). Willimon writes:

“Privilege is invisible to the privileged. Hawley made the invisible visible and publicly addressed the unmentionable. In speaking up, Hawley was that model preacher who is answerable to something more significant than the adoration of the congregation or to keeping people placid and unperturbed. Accountable to the gospel, he spoke.” (pg. 38-39)

Hawley Lynn chose to preach on some words from the prophet Malachi (Malachi 2:10-17) on that Sunday morning in 1947 in the small town of Pickens, SC. These are not easy verses. Malachi uses the metaphor of a cheating divorcing husband who is turning away from the wife of his youth. This metaphor is used by prophets like Jeremiah and Hosea to represent the broken relationship between Israel and God, when the Israelites looked to other gods for an easier life.

He thought these verses had something to say to his congregation who were not sure the black man who was pulled out of jail and beaten to death by 31 white men in the middle of the night didn’t deserve it. What Hawley found most helpful were Malachi’s opening rhetorical questions: “Have we not all one father? Has not one God created us? Why do we deal so treacherously with each other, every one against their brother, thus profaning the covenant of God?”

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His people, close to slavery and living in Jim Crow segregation, tended to believe that Blacks were not whole people, were not created in the same way as Whites in the eyes of God--that somehow God might not be the creator and father of people with dark skin. God hates (a strong word in Hebrew and English, Malachi 2:16) the brokenness and the violence of the sin of racism and the demonic twisting of God's image and likeness. God hates what racism does to our relationships with each other.

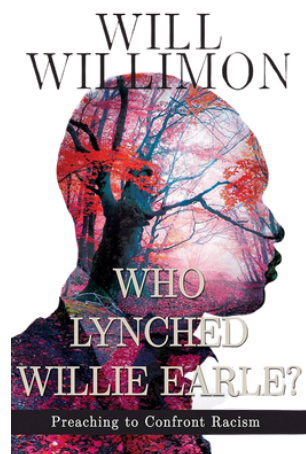
The people in Malachi wonder why God is so tired. The prophet answers: "We have made God tired by making evil ways look like they are the right ways and then saying that the evil ways of people are really what pleases God. We ask for God to create justice and we don't have a clue any more what that looks like (Malachi 2:17, paraphrase)."

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King attempted to show America what justice looks like and he argued that it is the church that has to name it, speak it, and proclaim it. A famous man (Cornel West) said: justice is what love looks like in public. The church needs to speak truthfully about what it is to be White in the United States and what it is to be Black. The Christian church asks this: "what would the black, beaten, crucified, lynched and RISEN Jesus do?" Circumstances have come together to make this question critical for our day in the United States in 2025, and the answer is what the church seeks together. A white preacher from 1947 and an obscure passage from Malachi may offer us some direction.

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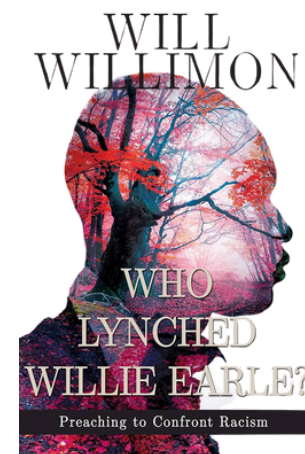
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