

March 25, 2017

Dear Friends,

Many magnificent or merely interesting things have happened since my last newsletter!

Topping the list: Lagrange, Ga.

On Jan. 26, Lagrange became the first city in the country to have a police chief apologize for a lynching. It became only the second city to have any public official apologize. (The first was Waco, TX.) Joining Chief Lou Dekmar at the podium of Warren Temple United Methodist Church, the church whose pastor L.W. Strickland, in 1940, called out fruitlessly to a city and a nation to do something about the lynching of Austin Callaway, was the mayor, the president of Lagrange College, a judge, a city councilman, to not only apologize but to promise to work against any and all racial discrimination in their small city. Reporting this historic occasion were the NYTimes (<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/26/us/lagrange-georgia-lynching-apology.html>), CBS, CNN, and the Atlanta Journal Constitution.

I went back on Mar. 18 for another bittersweet event – the unveiling of a memorial marker at the church. Provided by Equal Justice Initiative and unveiled by Bryan Stevenson (*Just Mercy*), the marker memorialized men lynched in that county (Troup) and one Troup resident lynched in adjoining Harris County. That man was Henry “Peg” Gilbert, whose story is briefly told in my book. You can read more about Gilbert at karenbranan.com/blog (“One Morning in Lagrange”). My grandfather was sheriff when Gilbert, a prosperous farmer and leader in the African American community, was beat and murdered by the police chief and other officers in the Hamilton, Ga., jail. His case was investigated by Hoover’s FBI and outrageously dismissed as “self-defense.” In 2015 it was re-investigated by law students at Northeastern U. Law School’s Civil Rights Project (<http://nuweb9.neu.edu/civilrights/georgia/henry-gilbert>).

Tara Dunn, the lead student in the investigation, spoke eloquently of Henry Gilbert’s life, followed by Sheila Moss Brown, Gilbert’s youngest granddaughter, who spoke of a grandmother and great aunt, Gilbert’s daughters, who kept his lynching a secret from their children for 69 years and managed to raise families free of bitterness and racism. She, along

with many other descendants, had traveled from far places to a town their great grandmother and her daughters were terrorized into fleeing; many, including Brown, were there for the first time. Austin Callaway's large family was also there, as was the family of Rev. L.W. Strickland, who was also memorialized on the plaque for his bravery in speaking out against Callaway's lynching when few others did. The "few others" were women of the all-white Women's Methodist Society. Also in attendance was the Davidson family, some of whom were also beaten but not murdered in the Hamilton jail. The Northeastern Law School link above provides more information on this family's travels.

In another first, a different white minister stood before each of the family groups and apologized for the sins of their predecessors in ignoring the lynching of their family member as well as for white ministers throughout history in turning their heads against centuries of slavery, lynching and other forms of racial oppression. Chills swept my body as I realized the Baptist preacher apologizing to the Gilbert family resembled my sheriff grandfather who'd turned his head. (<http://www.ajc.com/news/what-was-our-hearts-georgia-pastors-apologize-for-past-lynchings/lhhfuYwqKqG1NmJcCe1qEP/>)

After this service, we convened to the white First Baptist Church for a Homecoming service conducted by Equal Justice Initiative's Kiara Boone. We were all invited to share our thoughts and feelings at an open mic. I took my turn to tell of my great sorrow and shame at my grandfather's failure to do his duty and protect Gilbert and the Davidson families and turned my attention to whites in the room. We are the ones whose ancestors created this mess, I said, and we are the ones who currently, with other whites, keep it going, and we must all begin to come forward, to reveal history and to work with one another on our racism. After I spoke Kiara said more about how it's not just a matter of individual attitudes but of systemic racism. I must be careful to be more specific about that all-important fact when I speak in the future.

The next morning we faced the dark and the cold in the cemetery where Austin Callaway is believed to be buried. Several young African American women approached me in the dark to ask "Are you the lady who wrote the book?" and to thank me and take my picture. The father of one of them asked, "What did you write about?" and when I told him, he asked, "Where in Harris County did your people live?" When I told him Hamilton, he smiled and said, "So did mine." "What's your name?" I asked. "Willie Williams," he

replied. That was my grandfather's name, I said, then asked, "Are you a member of the Williams-Hudson family?" Yes, he replied. Then you are a part of my family as well, I told him. Saying this still makes me nervous. He knew what I meant. We hugged. When the service began I peered through the dark into the candlelight at the makeshift altar to see it was "Rev. Willie Williams" who was opening the service with a prayer. He later told me that he lives in Lagrange and has been a part of the Racial Reconciliation and Trust-Building Group which made this moment possible, for two years. These wonderful synchronicities continue to crop up in my life and keep me going. I'll have more to share in the next newsletter.

A large bowl on the altar was filled with broken shards of colored glass. As we were so moved, we walked up and took a piece or two and put them in a lantern. While we did this, the names of 600 women, men, and children lynched in the state of Georgia from 1877 to 1950 were being read. With each name, we said, "I speak your name (and the name). I took five pieces of glass for Loduska Crutchfield, Johnie Moore, Eugene Harrington, Burrell Hardaway and Henry "Peg" Gilbert, all lynched by or allowed lynched by members of my family. As I spoke their names, I wept. Soon afterward, I looked straight ahead just beyond the altar to witness a glorious sunrise. By now, the lantern, filled with many broken pieces, enlightened by candle glow and surrounded by love, had been transformed into a glowing mosaic. (<http://www.ajc.com/news/more-than-500-lynching-victims-recognized-sunrise-service/HTSDYZHESTzk5MSdpcl4cP/>)

Watching all those white preachers laying out the historical sins of their church and their profession was especially interesting to me given the books I have been reading lately (and recommend to you). They are *Who Killed Willie Earle?* by William Willimon; *Tears We Cannot Stop: A Sermon to White America* by Michael Eric Dyson; *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* by James Cone, and *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* by Willie James Jennings.

I have many more hopeful stories to tell, but realize I have gone on too long for one newsletter and so promise another one in a week. Thank you all so much for your interest and your support.

In the painful and loving journey toward racial equality,

Karen Branan

