

Study & Discussion Guide for *Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson

for The Episcopal Church in Middle and North Georgia | Diocese of Atlanta

Questions to Explore:

1. *Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson begins with information about the author's life experience while growing up poor in a racially segregated community in Delaware. Stevenson remembers his grandmother telling him, "You can't understand most of the important things from a distance, Bryan. You have to get close." (*Book, page 14*)

- How does Stevenson get close to the incarcerated people he is helping?
- How does getting close to Walter McMillian affect Stevenson's life?
- Can you be an effective criminal lawyer, teacher, priest or caring person if you are trying to help someone without getting close?

2. Early in the book, Stevenson describes an incident when he was racially profiled and the police searched his car. He wonders: *If there had been drugs in his car and he was arrested, would he have been able to convince an attorney that his car was searched illegally?* Stevenson writes, "Would a judge believe that I'd done nothing wrong? Would they believe someone who was just like me but happened not to be a lawyer? Someone like me who was unemployed and had a criminal record?" (*Book, page 44*)

- How does Stevenson's work shape his understanding of the justice system?
- Do his experiences make him more or less empathetic to those in the justice system?
- Is it surprising that someone whose 86-year-old grandfather was murdered would work so tirelessly against the death penalty?

3. As a result of his extensive work with low-income and incarcerated people, Stevenson concludes that "the opposite of poverty is not wealth; the opposite of poverty is justice." (*Book, page 18*)

- What does this statement mean?

- What examples in the book inform Stevenson's position on poverty and justice?
- What is justice? What does the title, *Just Mercy*, mean?

4. Stevenson describes numerous “workarounds” within the United States legal system. We learn that nearly every prisoner on death row had been tried by an all-white, or nearly all-white jury, despite a Supreme Court ruling in the 19th century that declared the practice of excluding black people from jury duty to be unconstitutional.

- Why do you think black people are excluded from the juries of black defendants?
- What factors should influence jury selection?

5. Many U.S. citizens will find this book painful to read, demoralizing, and even shameful.

- What kind(s) of emotional state(s) did the book bring up in you?
- Is this a book about combating racism? What is this book about?

6. Readers from varied backgrounds will approach this book with different knowledge and experiences.

- Did Stevenson's examples resonate with you, or were you shocked?
- Is the book an eye-opener for you, or validation of what you already knew?
- Consider how your reaction would differ if you were of a different race or class, were the victim of a serious crime, or had personal experience with the justice system.

7. Stevenson asserts that each of us is more than the worst thing we've ever done. Bearing this in mind, what role should mercy play in the way we respond to those who have committed crimes?

8. What life experiences help you relate to the themes of justice, mercy and redemption?

9. What makes it hard for us to turn away from stories of individual suffering?

- Do you respond with more compassion to individual stories than you do to information about injustice in the entire justice system?
- Why is that?

10. Is it morally right that those on the margins need those in the mainstream to champion their causes in order to be treated fairly?

11. What are the forces that distance us from those we as a society incarcerate and those we as a society condemn and put to death?

12. What in your faith journey demands that you respond to what you now know?

13. Does Stevenson's account of his work help you to see the connection between race and mass incarceration?

14. What spiritual lessons do you draw from the author's tenacity in the face of what many might find overwhelming?

15. We can see that wisdom from the Christian faith tradition is particularly powerful to Stevenson, helping him to frame the work he is doing. He references the passage from the Gospel of John where Jesus advocates for mercy for a condemned woman saying, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." (John 8:7 NRSV)

- Does this story speak to you?
- What other texts, stories, songs or personal experiences call you to compassion, mercy and forgiveness?

16. The United States' use of the death penalty differs from other countries' use. For instance, Germany abolished the death penalty after the Holocaust. In India, where the death penalty is legal, only a handful of criminals have been executed since the turn of the century.

- What do you know about the position of other countries on capital punishment and how it is enforced?

- How might politics, religion, culture or history play a role in their positions?

Next Steps:

After your complete reading of *Just Mercy*, you may wish to:

- ❖ Invite a group to watch [Stevenson's TED Talk](#) and engage in a conversation around its content.
- ❖ Visit the website of the [Equal Justice Initiative](#). Explore the resources there, including relevant reports on such topics as lynching in America, incarceration of children, and racial discrimination in jury selection.
- ❖ Read *The New Jim Crow* by Michelle Alexander and watch her [TED Talk](#). Alexander's book has an excellent study guide and includes a foreword by historian Dr. Vincent Harding.
- ❖ Learn about restorative justice, an alternative way to work with those who have engaged in criminal or antisocial activity. Read these articles from [Tikkun](#) magazine: "Restorative Justice: The Long Struggle" and "A Restorative Circle in the Wake of a Police Shooting." These articles explore the theology and application of restorative justice. The website [Restorative Works Learning Network](#) provides information, news and learning opportunities about restorative practices.

This guide was adapted from study guides from the University of Wisconsin and the Unitarian Universalist Association.

For more information, questions or assistance contact:

Dr. Catherine Meeks

email: kayma53@att.net or call 770-371-0527