



Diomil Reads

*a diocesan-wide opportunity for reading and discussion
about racial reconciliation*

Part memoir, part exhortation for much-needed reform to the American criminal justice system, Bryan Stevenson's *Just Mercy* is a heartrending and inspirational call to arms written by the activist lawyer who founded the Equal Justice Initiative, an Alabama-based organization responsible for freeing or reducing the sentences of scores of wrongfully convicted individuals. Stevenson's memoir weaves together personal stories from his years as a lawyer into a strong statement against racial and legal injustice, drawing a clear throughline from slavery and its legacy to today's still-prejudiced criminal justice system.

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." (page 14)
 - a. How does getting close to Walter McMillian affect Stevenson's life?
 - b. Can you be an effective criminal lawyer, teacher, priest or caring person if you are trying to help someone without getting close?
2. 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." (page 18)
 - a. What does this statement mean?
 - b. What examples in the book inform Stevenson's position on poverty and justice?
 - c. What is justice?
3. Many U.S. citizens will find this book painful to read, demoralizing, and even shameful.
 - a. What kind(s) of emotional state(s) did the book bring up in you?
 - b. Is this a book about combating racism? What is this book about?
4. Readers from varied backgrounds will approach this book with different knowledge and experiences.
 - a. Did Stevenson's examples resonate with you, or were you shocked?
 - b. Is the book an eye-opener for you, or validation of what you already knew?
 - c. 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.
5. 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?
6. What life experiences help you relate to the themes of justice, mercy, and redemption?
7. What makes it hard for us to turn away from stories of individual suffering?

- a. Do you respond with more compassion to individual stories than you do to information about injustice in the entire justice system?
 - b. Why is that?
8. 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?
9. What in your faith journey demands that you respond to what you now know?
10. Does Stevenson's account of his work help you to see the connection between race and mass incarceration?
11. What spiritual lessons do you draw from the author's tenacity in the face of what many might find overwhelming?
12. 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)
 - a. Does this story speak to you?
 - b. What other texts, stories, songs or personal experiences call you to compassion, mercy, and forgiveness?