

country is, “Do we deserve to kill?” Is this the right question? How would you answer this question?

When asked what effect he hoped *Just Mercy* would have on readers, Stevenson replied, “I hope it makes people more thoughtful about our criminal justice system and the need to prioritize fairness over finality, justice over fear and anger. Many of the problems I describe exist because too many of us have been indifferent or disinterested in the poor and most vulnerable among us who are victimized by our system...” Did he succeed at his stated goal? Why or why not?

*You may also want to watch Stevenson’s TED Talk:*

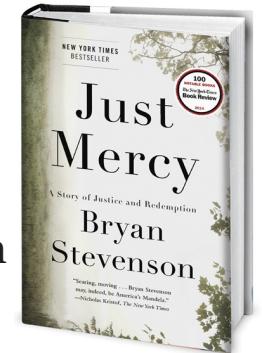
<http://bit.ly/bryanstevensonTEDtalk>

The Equal Justice Initiative website is [eji.org](http://eji.org)

## EPISCOPAL DIOCESE OF GEORGIA - LENT 2019



### Discussion Guide *Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson



This study is broken up into sections for a group to discuss the book in six sessions, for example each Wednesday from the week following Ash Wednesday through Wednesday in Holy Week. If meeting in a single session, select the questions most meaningful to your group.

Each week, you will also want to talk about what stood out to you in the section read, what reinforced your existing opinions of criminal justice and what challenged them? What else do you wish you knew about what Stevenson is writing? How does your faith in Jesus inform what you read this week?

#### *Week 1 - read the introduction and chapters 1 and 2*

Discuss Stevenson’s assertion, “Each of us is more than the worst thing we have ever done.” How does this relate to both your ideals about justice and the forgiveness offered in Jesus?

What was your reaction to the fact that Walter’s case took place in Monroeville where residents romanticize Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*?

Stevenson describes a traffic stop and his feelings during the incident. How is this like or different from your experience in a similar traffic stop?

*Just Mercy* is classified as a memoir as Stevenson’s life is very much a part of the story. Does that help or hinder the way you see the issues of justice the author presents in these opening sections?

## **Week 2 - read chapters 3-5**

Were details of Walter's case difficult for you to accept? What about his case surprised or challenged your assumptions?

Critics say too many excuses are being made for those who have done wrong. How do you see Herbert Richardson setting a bomb that killed a young girl in light of these critiques?

How do you see poverty as well as race as factors in the chapters you read this week?

In the introduction, Stevenson lamented that "the opposite of poverty is not wealth; the opposite of poverty, in too many places, is justice." How has that conviction been supported in what you encountered in the first five chapters?

## **Week 3 - read chapters 6-8**

Stevenson introduces his work with incarcerated children through the story of 14-year old Charlie. Discuss how your own sense of justice differs based on the age of the person accused of a crime.

What factors do you think should influence jury selection? Why?

The book is structured so that chapters about Walter's case are followed by chapters on cases which illustrated different issues. Do the issues raised in alternating chapters cause you to see Walter's case differently? How is the example of Walter changed by encountering stories of children and the mentally ill in the justice system?

The book is titled *Just Mercy*. Is your view of what this title means changing as you read the book?

## **Week 4 - read chapters 9-11**

Fictional courtroom dramas are common on TV, and in movies and books. How does Stevenson's experience in Chapter 9 fit with these fictional presentations and how did it differ?

Deinstitutionalization of the mentally ill radically changed our mental health system. In what ways do you see this as positive and what are the downsides of these changes? Should the accused person's mental illness impact decisions around sentencing?

Stevenson struggles with the degree to which media attention is helpful or harmful to the cases he represents. How might out of town coverage of a trial positively and negatively change views among people where a trial is taking place?

Has your opinions of Walter changed as you encounter more of his story? How do you see the author differently? Is Stevenson a fully fleshed out "character" in this memoir? What else do you wish you knew at this point?

## **Week 5 - read chapters 12-14**

Chapter 12 opens up issues unique to incarcerated women. What surprised you? How might challenges a woman faces differ from men? How does poverty also play into the problems some women face?

As the fiftieth person for whom courts overturned a wrongful conviction, Walter received damages for his time in prison. How does this fit with your ideas of justice? How might a court determine what is fair?

What facts about Joe Sullivan's life should a court take into account? Does justice differ in his case? Does his age and mental state change your concept of what is fair in his conviction or his sentencing?

What other cases in this section challenged or confirmed your concept of justice and the justice system?

In your opinion, is Stevenson against individuals accepting responsibility and/or consequences for their actions?

## **Week 6 - read chapters 15-16 and the epilogue**

Stevenson writes, "There is no wholeness outside of our reciprocal humanity?" What does this mean to you? How does this fit with the Gospel? Are there any stories of Jesus, or elsewhere in scripture, that fit with this idea?

What does it mean to be a "stonecatcher"? What are the implications, both positive and negative?

Stevenson states, "The question of capital punishment in this