

Turning toward Light: Just Mercy
Sunday, February 2, 2020

The movie *Just Mercy* is based on Bryan Stevenson's memoir, *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption*. Has anyone seen the movie? Read the book? Both tell the story of Stevenson's work with prisoners who have received the death penalty or as juveniles received a sentence of life in prison. The movie focuses on his work with a particular inmate, Walter McMillian. McMillian, ironically, was from Monroeville, Alabama, the home of Harper Lee and the setting for the fictional town of Maycomb in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. And as in the novel, where race and sex combine to indict an innocent man, so in the real town: in 1987 McMillian, an African-American man, was arrested for the murder of Ronda Morrison, a white woman. Though McMillian had spent the day of her murder at a barbecue with many people from his community, and though he didn't fit the description of a man seen leaving the store where the murder took place, the sheriff ignored these witnesses and charged him with the murder because McMillian had had an affair with a white woman. Where once he might have been lynched for that transgression, in late 20th century Alabama he was instead charged with and found guilty of a crime he hadn't committed by a nearly all-white jury. He was sentenced to death. Fortunately for him, his case ended up on Stevenson's desk as a lawyer at the Southern Prisoners Defense Committee and in 1993, after spending six years on death row, and after many briefs, motions, and arguments, his conviction was overturned and he was released.

But not all of Stevenson's arguments succeed and not all of his clients are innocent. Towards the end of the book he tells the story of Jimmy Dill who was condemned to death after shooting someone during an argument over a drug deal. The man was wounded, but lived. So Dill was charged with assault. But the man he'd injured didn't have health care coverage and so didn't get the care he needed. He died nine months after the shooting of complications from his injury, and so the charges against Dill were changed to murder. His counsel didn't tell the court about his client's intellectual disabilities and history of childhood abuse or point out that the actual cause of death was the lack of health care not the injury, and Dill was tried, convicted, and sentenced to death. Stevenson didn't get involved until the last appeal, 30 days before Dill's date of execution. And by then it was too late. So Stevenson's final service for Dill was to keep him company on the phone as he waited to be taken into the execution chamber. Here's what he wrote:

“I was in my office talking to Jimmy Dill on the night of his execution, and ... I ... realized that I was crying. The tears were sliding down my cheeks...The harder I tried to speak, the more I wanted to cry....

He would never have been convicted of capital murder if he had just had the money for a decent lawyer....The Supreme Court had banned the execution of people with intellectual disability, but states like Alabama refused to assess in any honest way whether the condemned are disabled. On the phone with Mr. Dill I thought about all of his struggles and all the terrible things he'd gone through and how his disability had broken him. I began to get angry about it. Why do we want to kill all the broken people? What is wrong with us, that we think a thing like that can be right? I tried not to let Mr. Dill hear me crying. I tried not to show him that he was breaking my heart. He finally got his words out, “Mr. Bryan, I just want to thank you for fighting for me. I thank you for caring about me. I love y'all for trying to save me.”

When I hung up the phone that night I had a wet face and a broken heart.

“Why do we want to kill all the broken people?” Yesterday at D---’s memorial service, D---’s mother P--- told us this story from a time when D--- was a child: The family was visiting the National Museum of the American Indian in D.C. and P--- gave the children \$5 to buy a souvenir in the gift shop. D--- was drawn to a shelf of carved stone antelopes and chose one to take home. Only when he’d put the antelope down on the cashier’s counter did P== notice that the antelope had only three legs. “Oh, look,” she said, “This one’s broken. Let’s put it back and get one with four legs that can stand.” “But Mama,” D--- said, “This one needs me. I’ll hold it up so it can stand.” And D--- spent his too short life holding up not only broken antelopes but broken people, acting for justice in all ways open to him.

So let’s turn the question around and ask not “Why do we want to kill all the broken people?” but “Why do some of us devote their lives to saving broken people?” And I think the answer is that people like D---- and Bryan Stevenson are saving broken people because they recognize and acknowledge that they themselves, like all of us, are broken people. As Bryan Stevenson wrote:

We are all broken by something. We have all hurt someone and have been hurt. We all share the condition of brokenness even if our brokenness is not equivalent. I desperately wanted mercy for Jimmy Dill and would have done anything to create justice for him, but I couldn't pretend that his struggle was disconnected from my own. The ways in which I have been hurt - and have hurt

others - are different from the ways Jimmy Dill suffered and caused suffering. But our shared brokenness connected us.

And he goes on:

I guess I'd always known but never fully considered that being broken is what makes us human. We all have our reasons. Sometimes we're fractured by things we would never have chosen. But our brokenness is also the source of our common humanity, the basis for our shared search for comfort, meaning, and healing. Our shared vulnerability and imperfection nurtures and sustains our capacity for compassion....

People sometimes characterize Unitarian Universalism as a religion where you can believe anything you want. But that is not true. We may not have creedal statements to which we must assent, but we do have some shared beliefs and the first of them is that humankind is good. As the first principle of our Unitarian Universalist Association puts it, we affirm “the inherent worth and dignity of every person.” Or as our Universalists ancestors would have said, “every person is a beloved child of God.” This is our core belief. We believe that people are born good, with the choice to act in ways which do or do not honor that fundamental goodness. And we understand that the circumstances of our lives guide the choices we make, so that people born into and living in situations of poverty, violence, and prejudice may have a harder time choosing that goodness, and that those of us born into and living in more comfortable, privileged, and safe situations may have an easier time. So that even those who commit violence, like Jimmy Dill and others whose stories Bryan Stevenson tells, did not act in a vacuum but often nudged by circumstances which narrowed their options to make life-giving choices. Our faith tradition calls us to believe in the goodness of all people. And the emphasis of our tradition on working for the world stems in large part from that belief. For if all people are good then all deserve to live in a fair and just society which nurtures them and their gifts.

But our tradition also recognizes that whatever our circumstances we all at times in ways large and small do not choose to act for goodness. And we all have been hurt by others who haven't acted out of their goodness. None of us is perfect and none of us comes from a perfect situation or lives in a perfect world. We have all fallen short. We are all broken – we are equal in our basic goodness but also in our lack of wholeness. That's the second belief we share.

Third, as the story of the blind people and the elephant reminds us, none of sees the full truth. That's why we don't limit our faith by creeds, for we know that a

creed can offer only one path into the way to truth. So also that means that no one person or group knows what is best for all.

Fourth, as good, loving, well-meaning, broken people groping together for fullness of life, we need to remember that we are in this together, in our goodness and our brokenness, in our groping and our goal, and we need to care for one another along the way. As we might hold hands to find our way in a dark wood, so we need to hold hands metaphorically to find our way into light and safety and freedom. This is why our tradition so emphasizes caring for others – not because we think we have all the answers others need or because we are some version of Lord or Lady Bountiful giving from our abundance to others' lack – though we sometimes come across that way – but because we recognize that we are in this together, that I help to mend my brokenness by helping to heal yours and letting you help to heal mine, only of course it isn't so neat an equation.

When I planned this sermon, I thought it was going to be a list of the ways we can help others based in Bryan Stevenson's work with those who have been imprisoned unjustly, and if you'd like to work on that, there are plenty of opportunities through UU Mass Action and also a day-long conference at the UU Church of Reading, Massachusetts on March 28 on prison ministries. There's a flyer at the back of the church if you'd like to learn more. But I realized that just talking about what we can do for others reinforces that view that we are the givers and others need to receive. And though acting in that spirit can make good things happen, ultimately that understanding just reinforces the unequal power balances which keep bringing us our problems. Benevolent dictators are still dictators.

People like Bryan Stevenson and D---- remind us that only when we act out of our common humanity, our understanding that others' troubles are our troubles and our troubles are others' as well, only then can shape the world we desire. How can we here help one another acknowledge our own brokenness and out of our pain and our failings help to make the world more beautiful? Because that's the other thing you need to believe as a UU – we can make the world more beautiful.

= Pamela M. Barz