

Sermon August 25 2019 Based on *Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson

There is a strength, a power even,
in understanding brokenness,
because embracing our brokenness
creates a need and desire for mercy,
and perhaps a corresponding need to show mercy.

When you experience mercy,
you learn things that are hard to learn otherwise.
You see things you can't otherwise see;
you hear things you can't otherwise hear.
You begin to recognize
the humanity that resides in each of us.

~ Bryan Stevenson,
[Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption](#)

Scripture:

Luke 6:32-36

'If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for God is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as the Lord is merciful.

2 Corinthians 12:8-10

Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.' So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

SERMON

This past March, Bryan Stevenson, founder of the Equal Justice Initiative, based in Montgomery AL, spoke at PSU, as part of a rock ethics institute program. He wrote best selling book *Just Mercy* about his work in the prison system. When I listened to him speak last March, I sat scribbling notes, thinking, this needs to be a sermon! You see, he spoke of 4 things each of us can do to change the world. It doesn't need to be big or flashy, we can all do the work of changing our world for the better. (Share cards with 4 Things You Can Do to Change the World).

Bryan Stevenson starts out his book with this story:

When he was 23 - in law school at Harvard - he took a course that had him spend a month as an intern with Southern Prisoners Defence Committee, in GA. Within a few days of arriving, he was assigned with the task of going to a maximum security prison that housed death row inmates, alone. His one task that day was to deliver a simple message to Henry, a man who had been on the row for 2 years - the message: "you will not be killed in the next year."

Stevenson writes how he was so nervous, that when he first met Henry he blurted out "I'm so sorry.." repeatedly apologizing - for his lack of knowledge, that they didn't have a lawyer for him yet... barely wedging in the sentence 'but your not at risk of execution anytime in the next year". Henry interrupted his chatter, grabbed his hands and said "I'm not going to have an execution date anytime in the next year?"

While those words didn't sound very comforting to Stevenson, all Henry could say was, "thank you, man, thank you! This is great news!" Henry went on, describing how Stevenson was the first person he'd met in the past 2 years who wasn't another death row prisoner or guard. He refused to let his wife or kids come because he was afraid they'd show up and he'd have an execution date. He didn't want them to come hear that. Now, he was going to have them come visit.

Stevenson relaxed into the visit, and once that singular message was delivered, they settled into conversation - real conversation about their lives. 3 hours later the guard came in and began to angrily shackle Henry, annoyed by the length of their visit. He could see that Henry was in pain, and again started apologizing. Henry turned and looked at him and said, 'don't worry about this Bryan, just come back.' Just come back.¹

¹ Stevenson, Bryan. 2015. *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption*. Random House Publishers.

That's the first of the 4 things needed to change the world, according to Stevenson. Get proximal. Get close. That day he learned the importance of getting close to the poor. He learned the Power of proximity. That we need to stand next to the suffering. We need to wrap our arms around those in need, hear their stories, stand beside them in their pain.

Get proximal. According to Stevenson, that's the first step in changing the world. It's something we can all do, in our day to day lives, by paying attention to the suffering around us. It's here, in our community. This week I sat in a small visitation room with Aaron, a 20 something year old prisoner at Centre County Correctional Facility, as a PA prison society visitor, listening to Aaron describe his struggle to properly manage his diabetes. We simply listened, respected his story, and promised to be in communication with the warden about his need. Nothing big and flashy, just standing beside a person in need. Getting proximal, getting close to those who suffer - that alone can change us and change the world around us.

The second ingredient in changing the world is to change the narrative. We cannot be guided by fear and anger. In his book, his lecture here at PSU last winter and elsewhere, Stevenson includes mind-numbing statistics about mass incarceration in our country, showing graphs of how in 1972 there were 300,000 people in American prisons. Today it's close to 2 and a half million people - the highest rate in the world. Nearly $\frac{1}{3}$ of all black men between the ages of 18 and 30 are in prison, on probation or on parole. Mind numbing.

We need to change the narrative.

We've changed the narrative on other national problems - like domestic abuse. Framing the drug problem in our country as a criminal issue rather than a health issue has been a major contributor to mass incarceration, specifically back in the 80's when the crack epidemic was devastating African American communities. We can't allow ourselves to get caught up in fear and anger. How we shape the narrative, the story, around the challenges that we face matters. We can change our own views - notice when fear dominates us, and we can take action in calling out our lawmakers to do the same.

Stevenson spends most of his book telling stories. Stories of those on death row, some who have incredible amounts of evidence proving their innocence, stories of children being given life sentences without parole, story after story of the poor, who have few resources to pay for legal

help, being treated in less than human ways. Each of us is more than the worst thing we have ever done, he reminds us.

It's hard work, overwhelming in scope. He tells a story of a time when, as a young lawyer he was invited to have tea with Rosa Parks and two of her dearest friends, Johnnie Carr, the African American woman who organized the Montgomery bus boycott, and Virginia Durr, a white woman whose husband represented Rosa Parks, Dr. King and others in court. He mostly just sat and listened to them reminisce about their work together, but at one point Rosa Parks turned to him and said, 'Now Bryan, tell us what the Equal Justice Initiative is, and what you're trying to do.' And he launched into his rap: we're trying to challenge injustice, confronting bias and discrimination, trying to end life without parole sentences for children. We're trying to do something about the death penalty, trying to reduce the prison population and to end mass incarceration.

I gave her my whole rap, he said, and when I finished she looked at me and she said, "Mmm mmm mmm." "That's going to make you tired, tired, tired." And that's when Ms. Carr leaned forward, she put her finger in my face, she said, "That's why you've got to be brave, brave, brave."

That was more than 20 years ago. There have been times when he's felt defeated, weary of this endless work. One night, driving home after a client was put to death after multiple unsuccessful appeals, he was as close to quitting as he's come. That's when he heard our Corinthians reading on a late night radio show. Here it's Paul speaking:

Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it (an affliction) would leave me, but the Lord said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.' So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

'So the power of Christ may dwell in me...for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.' Bryan recognizes he doesn't do this work alone. Nor do we, whatever our work is. Your work right now might be gathering information to make a big healthcare decision, it might be feeding breakfast to preschoolers at Park Forest daycare, your work right now might be supporting students as

they start a new school year. Whatever your work is, Stevenson encourages: Remain hopeful - that's the third necessary ingredient in changing the world. Hopelessness is the enemy of justice he believes. To stay committed to the work that Jesus calls us each to - to love our enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. To be merciful, just as the Lord is merciful. That's the work of justice. Don't make it complex Stevenson says, remain hopeful. We must remain hopeful and remain rooted in the call of Christ to love those that are hard to love.

The fourth ingredient in Stevenson's recipe for changing the world is perhaps the hardest for us to hear - especially those of us who live lives where we can walk away from the stories, the endless news cycles, that are hard to watch. The last necessary piece to bringing about change, is to be willing to do things that are uncomfortable and inconvenient. Loving those who are easy to love doesn't necessarily require much from us. But to love our enemies? That's hard, exhausting, frustrating, scary at times. That's a vital piece. I think Jesus is saying that in our gospel reading:

'If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return...Be merciful, just as the Lord is merciful.

We need to be willing to do things that are uncomfortable and inconvenient. A few of us here at UMC have lived into that in the past month, in supporting AnaMaria, who called on us for support as she was hoping to build a life for herself here in State College. She chose a different path, and headed back out to Utah last week, but I have learned a lot about what it means to engage in the messy, sometimes uncomfortable and inconvenient work of getting proximal to one who is suffering. Honestly, that was a really, really hard experience. I am humbled by what I've learned about myself, I've had to ask myself what I really believe and feel called by Christ to do, and I've wrestled with not being loved back. In the larger world context, this is a small, small part of the work, and it impacts us. Every act that we do makes an impact. Every time we choose to love, even if we're not loved back, it makes a difference. As challenging as that small example of working with AnaMaria was, one beautiful moment came at the end, when Matt, a deacon from the local Mormon church came along side all of us and worked with us to bring

about an acceptable solution. It was a bright spot to work with another faith leader of our local community. As I continue to reflect on this experience, I pray that I will not lose heart, that I, and we, will remain open-hearted to this work of justice and mercy for all of God's children, those who feel like enemies at times, as well as those who love us back.

When we are uncomfortable, and see our own brokenness, that can change us. As Stevenson is quoted on the bulletin cover: "embracing our brokenness creates a need and desire for mercy, and perhaps a corresponding need to show mercy." The work of Christ calls us to be willing to suffer and to show mercy, to ourselves and others. There's no glossing over that. It's uncomfortable, it's inconvenient and it's what is demanded of us as followers of Christ.

Stevenson ended his TED talk with this story -

I sometimes get out of balance, he said. I sometimes push too hard. I do get tired, as we all do. I've been representing kids who have been sentenced to do these very harsh sentences. And I go to the jail and I see my client who's 13 and 14, and he's been certified to stand trial as an adult. I start thinking, well, how did that happen? How can a judge turn you into something that you're not? And the judge has certified him as an adult, but I see this kid.

And I was up too late one night and I started working on a motion for a client I had who was 14 years old, a young, poor black kid. And I started working on this motion, and the opening statement was: "Motion to try my poor, 14-year-old black male client like a privileged, white 75-year-old corporate executive." He says he wrote about misconduct of all kinds, really ranting. The next morning, when he woke up, he realized, to his horror, that he had actually sent it to the court.

A couple months went by, and he had mostly forgotten all about it, but the day came when he had to go defend the case. He arrived at the courthouse feeling overwhelmed, thinking how difficult and painful it was going to be.

Stevenson continues - as I was walking up the steps of the courthouse, there was an older black man, the janitor in this courthouse who came over to me and he said, "Who are you?" I said, "I'm a lawyer." He said, "You're a lawyer?" I said, "Yes, sir." And he came over to me and he hugged me, whispering in my ear "I'm so proud of you." And I have to tell you, Stevenson said, smiling, it was energizing. It connected deeply with

something in me about the capacity of every person to contribute to a community, to a perspective that is hopeful.

Well I went into the courtroom. And as soon as I walked inside, the judge saw me coming in. He said, "Mr. Stevenson, did you write this crazy motion?" I said, "Yes, sir. I did." And we started arguing. And people started coming in because they were just outraged. I had written these crazy things. And police officers were coming in and assistant prosecutors and clerk workers. And before I knew it, the courtroom was filled with people angry that we were talking about race, that we were talking about poverty, that we were talking about inequality.

And out of the corner of my eye, I could see this janitor out in the hallway, pacing back and forth. And he kept looking through the window, and he could hear all of this hollering. He kept pacing back and forth. And finally, the janitor, this older black man with this very worried look on his face came into the courtroom and sat down behind me, almost at counsel table. About 10 minutes later the judge said we would take a break. And during the break there was a deputy sheriff who was offended that the janitor had come into court. And this deputy jumped up and he ran over to this older black man. He said, "Jimmy, what are you doing in this courtroom?" And this older black man stood up and he looked at that deputy and he looked at me and he said, "I came into this courtroom to tell this young man, keep your eyes on the prize, hold on."²

Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on. As Paul, imprisoned, wrote to the Phillipians - "But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize of God's heavenly calling in Christ Jesus." (Phil. 3:13-14)

We, each of us, is called to forget what's behind and strain - strain - be inconvenienced and made uncomfortable, as we press on toward the goal - God's calling in Christ Jesus.

What this work of changing the world looks like in your own life may be manifest in a million different ways. This sermon isn't about making you feel guilty that you're not doing enough - that doesn't help anyone. But it is an invitation to examine what makes you uncomfortable. Notice where you might turn away from the suffering you see and choose - choose to get proximal, to stand beside the other - Maybe that takes the form of calling, or emailing, your congressmen and sharing your conviction of justice and mercy regarding how they represent us. Perhaps you listen to another's story, get

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https://www.ted.com/talks/bryan_stevenson_we_need_to_talk_about_an_injustice/transcript?language=en#t-452582

close to the vulnerable here in our community. Right now, in your life, it may mean having a regular practice of praying for others, for those that are easy to love and those that are not - that's quite a discipline, that act of prayer alone is one way to change the world. Your task may simply start with noticing your habits of turning toward suffering or turning away from suffering, and what that's all about.

Changing the world sounds overwhelming. We are not to lose hope. No, the journey is long. If you find you're weary, rest, and then continue on. Keep your eye on the prize and hold on. Hold on.