

Discussion Questions for "Just Mercy" Film

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1. The movie reminds us several times that Willie D.'s story is set in the town where Harper Lee wrote *To Kill a Mockingbird*. The irony of that becomes more and more apparent as the white townspeople express their pride in that "civil rights monument" while enacting a racist injustice themselves. In what ways are we (collectively as a church or as individuals) invested in narratives of white righteousness that prevent us from seeing our own culpability in injustice? What other comfortable and comforting narratives does this movie ask us to question or discard?

2. Willie D.'s story makes a compelling movie in part because it fits a traditional three-act heroic narrative structure and in part because Willie D. is so patently innocent. However, the stories of his two friends, Herbert and Anthony Ray, do not easily fit a heroic movie presentation. Herbert did actually kill a girl. Anthony Ray was not exonerated for almost 30 years. We don't know until the postscript that he was wrongfully convicted. Yet both men are presented as also sympathetic. Willie D. is not ashamed to be their friend. Herbert's death scene is presented with parallels to the crucifixion. How does the movie make us rethink the connections between justice and mercy? What would justice and mercy look like in Herbert's case? What are our underlying models for justice, and how do our notions of God as a just and merciful God inform our understanding of how we should treat people like Herbert? How will we choose to vote based on these ideas? Do we truly have a justice system? Where and how can we concretely promote and work for a more just and merciful system? (See also *The New Jim Crow* and The Innocence Project.)

3. The word intersectional doesn't appear in the movie, but the movie is definitely intersectional. It doesn't present Willie D.'s false conviction as merely white racists on one side and Black people on the other. There are many victims of injustice - Ralph Myers is not a cartoon villain but an abused child of the foster system whose PTSD was exploited by a corrupt sheriff. The postscript reminds us that Ronda Morrison never got justice for her murder. In short, in this movie racism has many victims, and it intersects with and underpins classicism and sexism among many other forms of injustice. What ways do we see racial bigotry intersecting with other injustices in our world? Why is racism so entwined with injustice against the poor and other marginalized groups in this country?

4. In *Just Mercy* the church is both a bulwark against racism and despair (Stevenson bonds with his first prisoner over their AME upbringing, he attends a church service at his lowest point, Herbert asks Stevenson to pray with him) and culpable in the corrupt death penalty system (a minister accompanies Herbert to the death chamber as part of the squad of white guards). In what ways is the church today fighting racism? In what ways is the church today culpable in promoting or winking at racism? What is the church's role in addressing injustice today in this country? (Historical references are great, but let's not lose sight of the ultimate question - what are we going to do now?)

5. One of the crux points of argument right now is among those who want to abolish the police, those who want to defund the police and those who want to reform the police in more incremental ways. (We might think of this as let's bulldoze the house because it's more mold than house vs saying the house is salvageable but we need to gut it to remove the mold vs the house is pretty solid as long as we bring in some bottles of bleach.) The movie emphasizes that Willie D.'s story is not an isolated case, but a case study in a system riddled with injustice. Some would even say a system founded in injustice. But Stevenson works through the system. He appeals to the DA's better nature rather than treating him as an irredeemable enemy. What do you think? Where would you place yourself on the spectrum of approaches and why?