



MSPC | Maxwell Street
Presbyterian Church
social justice committee

Dismantling Systemic Racism Movie/Documentary Viewing 2019: 13th

The United States currently imprisons over 25% of the world's incarcerated population; a staggering one in three Black men is expected to spend time in prison or jail in his lifetime; the prison population has grown from 357,292 in 1970 to 2.3 million in 2016; and more Black men are imprisoned today than were enslaved in 1850. DuVernay's film urgently challenges us to move beyond simple calls for reform that will only redesign a system of oppression that has existed in various iterations since the end of the Civil War. It is a call to humanize, a call to view mass incarceration as a profound moral crisis and change the way the United States views human dignity, and, above all, a call to take an active stand for racial justice.

The film ends with Bryan Stevenson's haunting words: "People say all the time, 'I don't understand how people could have tolerated slavery... How could people have gone to a lynching and participated in that?... If I was living at that time, I would have never tolerated anything like that.' And the truth is, we are living at this time. And we are tolerating it." Stevenson has been representing capital defendants and death row prisoners in the deep south since 1985, when he was a staff attorney with the Southern Center for Human Rights in Atlanta, Georgia. Since 1989, he has been executive director of the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI), a private, nonprofit law organization he founded litigates on behalf of condemned prisoners, juvenile offenders, people wrongly convicted or charged, poor people denied effective representation, and others whose trials are marked by racial bias or prosecutorial misconduct. As we reflect on the documentary, *13th*, may quotes from Stevenson's book *Just Mercy*, guide and inform us.

What are your reactions to the film? Focus on your emotions at this moment. Take deep breaths and an honest inventory of what you're feeling without any shame attached.

"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."

Do you think the message of the film was ultimately hopeful? Why or why not?

"Mercy is most empowering, liberating, and transformative when it is directed at the undeserving. The people who haven't earned it, who haven't even sought it, are the most meaningful recipients of our compassion."

Angela Davis stated in the film, "Historically, when one looks at efforts to create reforms, they inevitably lead to more repression." What do you think are some of the factors that allowed this system of racial control to simply evolve and replicate itself for the past 150 years?

"We are all implicated when we allow other people to be mistreated... Fear and anger can make us vindictive and abusive, unjust and unfair, until we all suffer from the absence of mercy and we condemn ourselves as much as we victimize others. The closer we get to mass incarceration and extreme levels of punishment, the more I believe it's necessary to recognize that we all need mercy, we all need justice, and-perhaps-we all need some measure of unmerited grace."

How does *13th* characterize our criminal justice system and political institutions? Do you agree or disagree even partially, why? Was there a particular case or series of facts that altered or challenged any of your pre-existing views?

"But simply punishing the broken--walking away from them or hiding them from sight--only ensures that they remain broken and we do, too. There is no wholeness outside of our reciprocal humanity."

How do you think media and popular culture representations of Black Americans, particularly of Black men, have contributed to a dangerous climate of white fear and anxiety? How can we challenge these instances of racism and dehumanization?

"Proximity has taught me some basic and humbling truths, including this vital lesson: Each of us is more than the worst thing we've ever done. My work with the poor and the incarcerated has persuaded me that the opposite of poverty is not wealth; the opposite of poverty is justice."

How can you be more vigilant against institutional racism?

"I've come to believe that the true measure of our commitment to justice, the character of our society, our commitment to the rule of law, fairness, and equality cannot be measured by how we treat the rich, the powerful, the privileged, and the respected among us. The true measure of our character is how we treat the poor, the disfavored, the accused, the incarcerated, and the condemned."