

As mentioned in my previous reflection, students in my DPT cohort shared many resources with each other last spring to bring awareness to black voices and racial justice. One student suggested watching the film *Just Mercy*, which depicts the true story of Walter McMillan, a black man, who was wrongly accused by law enforcement of murdering a white woman in the deep south. I am very interested in true crime stories, specifically wrongful convictions, so my interest was piqued immediately. The movie depicts how white law enforcement coerced other inmates to falsely testify that McMillan had murdered this woman, despite many witnesses reporting that he was with them at the time of the murder. McMillan was found guilty of murder and sentenced to death. Bryan Stevenson, a young, black lawyer and recent graduate of Harvard, represented McMillan in a new trial and successfully exposed the law enforcement corruption that led to McMillan's wrongful conviction. McMillan was exonerated, and Stevenson opened and practiced at the Equal Justice Initiative, where he continued to overturn wrongful convictions. I really enjoyed the plot of this movie, but I was also interested in how race and power were central themes of the story. This movie demonstrated something which is well known to me and in contemporary America, which is that black people have been disenfranchised and stripped of power since this country's conception. Those with power, including white people and those in law enforcement, have consistently used their privilege to suppress those with less power, particularly black Americans. Several months passed between when I watched this movie and when I tuned into episode 45 of a local podcast called *Criminal*. In this episode, host Phoebe Judge interviewed Bryan Stevenson, who elaborated on the true events of *Just Mercy* and more. At one point, Judge asked Stevenson if he ever came across inmates in his work at the Equal Justice Initiative who were not worthy of legal support. Stevenson's answer moved me deeply, and I would like to include it in its entirety below.

"I've never met anybody who I think is beyond hope, or beyond redemption, or whose life doesn't matter.

I think, you know, we have to judge our commitment to the rule of law. Our commitment to human rights can't be measured by how we treat people who impress us, by how we treat people who we like, how we treat the rich, the powerful, the privileged. We have to judge our commitment to justice, to the rule of law, to human rights, by not looking at how we treat the rich and the powerful and the privileged, we have to look at how we treat the disfavored, the disabled, the condemned.

I mean, it's easy to be just to people you like, people you favor. It's easy to be compassionate towards people who you have a lot of respect for, but it's not really mercy if you give it to the people who deserve it. Mercy is mercy when it's given to the undeserving. And so I've never met anybody about whom I should say, "Oh, no, they can't get mercy. They don't deserve it." It's— that's what mercy is about."

This quote coupled so perfectly with the central themes of the film *Just Mercy*. Again, historically, the human rights of black Americans have been violated because they were not seen as powerful or privileged. Not only do these infringements occur in the context of the legal system, but they also occur within the medical field. Black patients have historically been dismissed and mistreated by racist medical professionals and excluded from working as professionals in the medical fields. There must be people, like Stevenson, who commit themselves to serving the "disfavored, the disabled, the condemned" to stop the human rights infringements that have been committed against black Americans. As a physical therapy student and future physical therapist, I have made a commitment to support the human rights

of all patients and “do no harm.” In the Carolina Commitment, I pledged that “I will combat discrimination and racism wherever they appear, and I will be part of the cure for these diseases of the heart and mind. I will create an inclusive environment for my patients and colleagues. I will be a guiding light for diversity and representation.” I believe the path to fulfilling my personal and professional commitments includes focusing on serving the needs of the underserved. I hope to be in a position in my professional career where I can work with diverse and historically underserved populations to provide physical therapy in an equitable way and do my part to support these communities and DEI efforts as a whole.