A Reflection on Bryan Stevenson’s “Just Mercy”

In Ferguson, Mo., on Aug. 9, 2014, a man was shot dead by a police officer. Eyewitnesses reported the victim had raised his hands in surrender as he was shot and, despite this, the officer continued to fire.

“Hands up, don’t shoot,” became the rhyme of the unheard. Family members, friends, neighbors, and strangers cried in horror to the death they said they believed was both brutal and unwarranted. As stories emerged, tensions escalated. Enter SWAT teams, tear gas, flash grenades and smoke bombs — combined with looting, vandalism and massive crowds of angry protesters. The result was a monumental uprising, a demonstration unlike anyone would expect to find in a 21st century American suburb. With the shooting, a long-smoldering fire was re-ignited.

The fuel that fed the flame? Racism.

While controversy abounds regarding the Michael Brown shooting in Missouri, history is rife with evidence of innocent individuals wrongfully convicted or murdered because of their race. Every shard of glass littering the streets serves as a hateful reminder of our broken humanity. Resounding chants echo in our minds long after stories have faded from view. And yet, race-related crime and unrest continue.

The events detailed in “Just Mercy” relay a tragically common example of what happens when people allow preconceived notions to cloud better judgment. The trials and
tribulations endured by Walter McMillian, a backbone figure in “Just Mercy,” in my opinion, showcases one of the more gross miscarriages of justice ever seen. As author Bryan Stevenson thoughtfully explained, the fact McMillian was an innocent man cannot have been clearer. Walter was sent to death row in the state penitentiary before trial, revealing the unconscionable bias judge Robert E. Lee Key held against him. Countless eyewitnesses who saw McMillian at his home at the time of the murder were ignored. Men testifying against McMillian relayed confusing, nonsensical stories, and made impossible claims later proven false by proper documentation. The truth of the case was presented and abruptly thrown aside, because McMillian was a black man, doing things members of his community thought a black man ought not to be doing. He committed no crime. He simply lived his life until someone decided it would be a good idea to use the color of his skin as a scapegoat for an unsolved murder. Shockingly, people fell for it.

McMillian was innocent. That was clear. But because the idea of a black man having an affair with a white woman was appalling to residents of Monroeville, Ala., McMillian lost years to the system. Because some insist on differentiating people based on the color of their skin, McMillian lost everything. He will never have a chance to get those years back.

As politicians continue to banter about our prison systems and as legislation is pushed forward regarding rights of prisoners, we must remember the accounts detailed in “Just Mercy.” We must remember the convicted aren’t always guilty and those who roam free are not always innocent. When we say atrocities will never happen again, we need to hold fast to that statement; even though it is 2015, and we’d like to believe that racism is dead and buried and our society has come so far, we still hear stories like those of McMillian and Brown. This brings us to the startling realization that never again is now.
When politicians ask if we support the death penalty, be reminded though we’ve failed to accept it, all lives matter — be they young or old, guilty or innocent, remorseful or not.

In the end, the question is so much larger than if the accused were innocent. The question is one of complete and blatant disregard for human life. After all we have been through, how can we willingly allow lives to be taken from us for no reason other than they are apparently guilty? If we are wrong, we will not get a chance to make things right. A human life is one thing we can never bring back.

Until we truly come to terms with this fact, until we accept our wrongdoings, the fire will continue to smolder. Until we forgive, but never forget, sparks will fly. Until we unite, not against any group or denomination, but against hatred itself, the world will be reminded of this undying flame. If we do not change, something is going to cause the flames to explode. And we will all get burned. Only we are to blame, unless we remember one simple concept:

Be merciful.