

FILM REVIEW

Mass, Circles and Another justice: three films about restorative justice

Mass is a fictionalised film and is directed by Fran Kranz. The film is 1 hour and 51 minutes long.

Circles is a documentary and is directed by Cassidy Friedman. The film is 1 hour and 22 minutes long.

Another justice is a documentary and is directed by Chloé Henry Biabaud and Isabelle Vayron. The film is 53 minutes long.

In most films, a box of tissues would not play a key role. But in a film about a restorative conversation between two sets of grieving parents, this unassuming prop becomes a focal point. A tense and gut-wrenching story about grief, harm, forgiveness and healing, *Mass*, written and directed by Fran Kranz and released in 2021, is a simple yet profoundly ambitious film; it takes place almost entirely in a single room within a church in the United States and takes a hard look at the complicated emotions that arise when tragedy occurs and there are no clear answers for those left to deal with the aftermath.

This review focuses on three films that take place in the United States: *Mass*, a fictionalised story; *Another justice*, a documentary focusing on three different stories of loss; and *Circles*, a documentary that takes place in a school in Oakland, California. Although *Mass* will be given the most attention, the stories together provide a powerful lens through which to consider forgiveness and harm.

In the opening scene of *Mass*, we see a well-meaning but nervous church volunteer (played by Breeda Wool) arrive at a small Episcopalian church near mountains and open fields. She skitters about trying to get the church ready – we do not yet know for what – admonishing a young male employee whose sulky behaviour sets her on edge. Desperate to please, she seems as unsure about her role in the upcoming events as she is about how to hold herself.

A mediator (played by Michelle N. Carter) soon arrives at the church, authoritative and calm. She is quick to establish norms, and the viewer begins to understand what is about to occur. Four chairs are arranged around a table in the church room; the church volunteer anxiously puts the box of tissues in the centre of the table. The mediator asks her to put it to the side, telling her that the box of tissues ‘looks freaky’ on full display. There are many such moments within *Mass* that address and honour the complicated, intricate choices that are necessary for a restorative justice practitioner or mediator to consider.

It quickly becomes clear that the conversation is taking place between two couples – one whose son has committed a mass school shooting; the other whose son was killed in this shooting. To the film’s credit, it is not immediately clear which

couple is which. In the beginning, the four – played by Martha Plimpton, Ann Dowd, Jason Isaacs and Reed Birney – greet each other, unsure, hurt and lost. The film becomes an exercise in discovering what these people want or need from each other, and for themselves.

Although the plot of the film is straightforward, the most compelling parts of *Mass* are the parts I cannot describe. The film is almost intimidatingly well acted. The emotions that cross the faces of the parents as they grapple with loss and harm are both captivating and wholly familiar to anyone who has participated in a restorative process. The premise may seem obvious – forgiveness, healing – but the give-and-take, the wild grief exchanged between these parents is surprising. The emotional dynamics witnessed within each couple, how they differ between the couples, are moving.

Two other films that take place in the United States, *Circles* and *Another justice*, also address restorative processes in the aftermath of violence. Both are documentaries and approach the subject of violence in different settings. *Another justice*, directed by Chloé Henry-Biabaud and Isabelle Vayron de la Moureyre, unfolds three stories of people who were victimised by violence and tried to heal by connecting with the person who caused them harm. Agnes Furey's daughter and grandson were killed by a man named Leonard Scovens; Agnes began corresponding with Leonard in prison, and through their letters both came to experience some measure of relief. As their relationship deepened, Agnes became an activist and a vocal proponent of restorative justice. The prison in which Leonard is held still will not allow Agnes to visit, despite repeated attempts. Some of their written correspondence is read aloud during the film; their letters are uncommonly beautiful. The film also focuses on Kate and Andy Grosmaire, whose daughter was killed by her boyfriend; and Renee Napier, whose daughter was killed by a drunk driver. Agnes Furey, Kate and Andy Grosmaire and Renee Napier all found some way forward through forgiveness.

Circles, directed by Cassidy Friedman, follows Eric Butler, a high school restorative justice counsellor who tries to help his students navigate the violence that surrounds them in Oakland, California, while his own son also struggles with violence and police contact. Throughout the film, the viewer is constantly reminded that although these are children, they have experienced and come to expect harm and trauma as a fact of life. In an early scene in *Circles*, Butler leads a restorative conversation with his students, who all attend a high school for kids who have experienced trouble with attendance, previous school discipline, or juvenile detention – as Butler says, the so-called 'bad' kids. In this conversation, a student asks Butler, 'What is this?' He replies, 'It's gonna be the best thing that's ever happened to you in school.' Although he says this encouragingly, the viewer cannot help but be struck by the truth of this statement – these students have been neglected at every turn in their education. A restorative conversation as a result of violence at a second-chance school may well be the best thing that has ever happened to these students in a learning environment.

While *Another justice* and *Mass* focus on restorative approaches to individual harm, *Circles* acknowledges that the central conflict in these students' lives is not interpersonal but systemic: the students in the film are low-income and Black and

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Brown, vulnerable to violence and accustomed to neglect. The film follows Butler, a Black man, as he tries to support them amidst the tide of other forces in their lives: poverty, misogyny and sexual violence, structural racism, the failure of the education system and the crushing weight of the punitive legal system. The most troubling thing about this film is the way in which Butler tries to battle these forces alone; the pressure to try to help his students is overwhelming. Although the restorative approach to conflict in his school seems to provide a way forward for his students, the film serves as a stark reminder that one person cannot provide another enough restorative justice to counter a lifetime of harm.

Although all three films centre their stories around the idea of healing through forgiveness, a connected theme that weaves all through them is the victim's quest for answers and the autonomy that they were denied by the legal system. In each film, the criminal legal system's response to crime leaves the victims feeling anguished and dissatisfied. In *Another justice*, every story touches on the way in which the state legal system left them without a voice in the trial or its aftermath. Through direct communication and forgiveness, the victims are able to claim a measure of agency that was previously taken away. In *Circles*, Eric Butler tells his students, 'First thing I'm gonna do is apologize to y'all because y'all have been treated like shit for a long time.' This apology paves the way to empowerment: 'Now I want y'all to realize that this is your life, and you gotta make choices for yourself.' By making himself a proxy for those who have wronged them, and giving them a chance to forgive him, he provides them with some measure of agency. Forgiveness as a way to attain a measure of autonomy.

During the restorative encounter in *Mass*, the mother of the boy who committed the mass shooting cries first. Her grief seems almost repulsive to the rest, including the father of this same boy. But as soon as she cries, the mother of the boy who was killed stands up and retrieves the tissues placed unobtrusively in the corner of the room, earlier in the film. She puts them in front of the mother whose son killed her own, slams them down. The force of her action seems both spiteful and comforting. One mother is in need of something; although she has mixed feelings, the other is able to provide it. This simple gesture captures both the range of emotions that people feel when dealing with harm and the satisfaction of finally being able to address these emotions. The tissues are left on the table for the remainder of the film.

I am an American. As I write this, a community in Uvalde, Texas, is grieving the loss of nineteen children and two teachers, killed by a gunman at an elementary school. Is it ironic timing to be writing about violence and mass shootings in America? Sadly, I do not think so. As of May, there have been over 200 mass shootings in the United States in 2022 alone. *Mass* is not just a film about a fictionalised American shooting and the grieving process that ensues; it is a punch in the gut for a country where gun violence has become commonplace. These parents do not feel unfamiliar – they are there-but-for-the-grace-of-God-go-I. As an American, I recognise them. I see them in the news, all the time. In *Mass*, the parents search for answers that the criminal legal system has failed to provide. The mother of the boy who was killed said despairingly, 'He destroyed your lives. All of

our lives.' The mother of the boy who killed him replied, 'He did. But the love we had, it was real.'

Arguably, one of the roles of restorative justice is to complicate the narrative of victims and offenders that the criminal legal system gives us, that we give each other; to hold contradictory things together and try to make sense of them; to recognise the validity and the logic of competing emotions. It is not perfect, and the idea of perfection in justice is likely unattainable. As Eric Butler says in *Circles*, 'We've never experienced the thing that all of us think is justice. But the idea of restorative justice is to make things as just as possible.' Perhaps these three films can teach us how we can rely on each other to find answers and, ultimately, to heal.

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