

DISSECTING MAYHEM 12-16-12

Reflections on the Javon Belcher Murder

Every now and again it seems to me appropriate to make comment from this pulpit about items in the news and endeavor to help us look at them from a Biblical perspective. I did this a year ago when I preached the sermon, *Cowardly Lions*, about the cover-ups at Penn State. So, since I find myself between sermon series today, I am going there once again, and once again the news item is connected to the football world. No, I am not going to be preaching on Big Ben's broken ribs. Instead, I go to a story that seemed to draw together so many cultural debates and provoke so many diverse remarks. Like the Penn State-Sandusky story, this one too is tragic. I refer to the murder-suicide committed by Jovan Belcher on December 1 – the day when Belcher shot his girl friend and the mother of the couple's infant daughter, Kasandra Perkins, nine times; then drove to his place of employment where, in front of his boss and a few others, Belcher put the gun to his own head and ended his life. Events like this happen almost every day in our country, but this one gained special notoriety because Jovan Belcher was the starting outside linebacker of the Kansas City Chiefs and committed his crimes on the day before a Chiefs home game and in their practice facility. Amidst considerable debate over what to do, the Chiefs played and won their football game the day after this tragedy. And the commentaries on these happenings began flooding the internet, the airwaves and the print media.

What do you say when a 25 year old star athlete, making two million dollars a year, goes out in such a dramatic and dreadful fashion? If you get paid to talk about such things, you do take advantage because this story has everything – guns, sex, football, money and even a little religion. The first comments on the story that many people heard came on Sunday evening – Football Night in America on NBC - where sports commentator, Bob Costas, took opportunity to fire shots at -- guns, and claiming that, quote, *if Jovan Belcher did not possess a gun, he and Kasandra Perkins would be alive today*. Actually, in saying that, Costas was quoting, but favorably so, another sports journalist, Jason Whitlock of Kansas City who actually said that the NRA is the new KKK. Wow! Well, as you can imagine, ever since the Costas remarks were aired, the talking heads of media-land have been lining up with him and Mr. Whitlock or against them. Are guns to blame for murders such as this? Is that the lesson we are to learn? Is more gun control the answer? I was discussing this with Brooke Hopkins last week and he shared that, from his perspective, guns are not the problem. Brooke told me that guns don't kill anybody. Brooke said the problem is the

bullets. It's the bullets that kill people. And he is quite right about that isn't he? But, as usually happens, the proponents of gun control use events like this to push their cause. And I understand that. When we see a tool used so abominably, it is quite natural to react against the tool. But, as a teacher of God's word, what might I have to say about guns and gun control? Not much. The constitution speaks to the gun issue, but not really the Bible – not directly. The Bible, of course, predates guns by many centuries. But not weapons. The Bible mentions swords hundreds of times and in Luke 22:36 Jesus suggests to His disciples that they purchase a sword, a word that implies the Lord sees no wrong with the private ownership of weapons. Guns, however you think they should be regulated, are not rightly blamed for this murder. To suggest that an NFL linebacker could not kill his girl friend or himself without one is manifestly absurd. Guns, in themselves, are okay. But what do sinners do with them?

Some commentators have looked a little deeper for the cause of this tragedy and blamed it, not on guns, but on football. Now, we're talking. Football is a violent game and, to excel at it, one must become a violent man. So, here we are, as a culture, training our young men in this violence and paying them handsomely for their success. This includes teaching them to be tough, to cultivate their rage and to "protect this house." It is not a gentle sport and has a tendency not to produce gentle men. This makes sense to some degree doesn't it? Can we lay the blame for this murder on the culture of football and the kind of young men it creates? I suppose we might go there if murder became fairly common among NFL players; but the Belcher story was news because this almost never happens. There is no evidence that football practice turns men into killers. In fact, some could effectively argue that sports like football provide a healthy outlet for the natural, testosterone-based aggressiveness in young males. But what does the Bible say about this? Might the football culture contribute to the murder rate? It might. Proverbs 22:24-25 *Do not associate with a man given to anger; Or go with a hot-tempered man, 25 Or you will learn his ways And find a snare for yourself.* Who you spend time with does affect your character. Violent young men, hanging out with violent young men is a recipe for trouble. This is always something to keep an eye on. But, seriously, the culture of football and the violence it encourages may be responsible for concussions and bad knees, but blaming football seems to miss the mark. Football, and the football culture, in itself is okay. But what do sinners do with it?

Maybe you see where I am going with all this today. I am just getting started because there are several more directions one may look to point the finger to explain this horrid crime. And they are all worthy of consideration. The third direction one could go is to pin the blame on religion. We are

told by many that religion is the source of the preponderance of violence in the world, and you can see where people get that. Obviously, it is religious zealotry gone wrong that is responsible for the deaths on 9-11 and the many deaths since then related to the war on terror. Clearly, there are episodes in history of tremendous violence occurring as a result of religious differences. I just heard this week of a young man who rejects Christianity in part because of what his school teachers told him about the Crusades. The history of England is filled with religiously provoked violence. Would we have a less violent world if we were all atheists? Imagine that. *Imagine there's no heaven. It's easy if you try. No hell below us. Above us only sky. Imagine there's no countries. It isn't hard to do. Nothing to kill or die for. And no religion too. Imagine all the people. Living life in peace.* This is what John Lennon sang forty years ago. They began the Olympics this summer in London with that very song which suggests that if we could get rid of religion we would all be so peaceful and happy. And I could see how one might think this. At least for a few minutes. At least until you stop to think that the three greatest murderers of the last century, and I refer to Stalin, Hitler and Mao, were all hostile to religion. Hitler was responsible for killing about eleven million noncombatants. Stalin murdered around 20-30 million of his own countrymen. Mao however takes the crown as the greatest killer of the 20th century, taking the lives of more than Stalin and Hitler combined. So, just a little thought should tell us that the source of murderous motivations can not be laid at the feet of religion.

Now, why would this even come up in the Belcher case? Religion entered in when, just before he pulled the trigger to take his own life, Jovan made the sign of the cross. Think about that. What would lead someone to do that? I suppose he must have been feeling guilty and was hoping for mercy from God. Is there reason, looking at this from a Biblical perspective, to be hopeful for this man's soul? I don't see any. This is a prodigal, not coming home asking for mercy from Father, but surrendering to shame and hopelessness. This is someone familiar with a form of Christian paganism that gives you a magic formula to apply for good luck before you destroy what He made in His image. Consider II Corinthians 7:**10** *The sorrow that is according to the will of God produces a repentance without regret, leading to salvation, but the sorrow of the world produces death.* Was it his religion or lack thereof that contributed to Jovan's choices on that fateful morning? It doesn't matter how you define it. Irreligion or twisted religion lead to the same end. The hopelessness of unbelief or the false hopes of superstition both are agents of death. Contrary to what John Lennon suggests, religion is not the world's big problem. But what do sinners do with it?

Okay, here is a fourth suggestion as to what led up to the murder-suicide on December 1. Let's blame sex. It's to blame for most everything else and it figures prominently in this story. We begin with the premarital sex of Jovan and Kasandra that did not result in abortion, but in the birth of their son. It was this relationship that violated God's order, that set the context for the greater sin. Of course, almost no one is going to say anything of the sort in public. Not in our day. Few scruples about sex outside of marriage remain. But, we are a very confused society when it comes to adultery. We are still a bit bothered by infidelity – even when that infidelity violates not the relationship of husband and wife but that of boy friend and girl friend. There are still some negative feelings toward cheating on your woman, especially when she is caring for your child. And, at this point, I offer a little more of the story. It seems that the fatal shooting of Kasandra Perkins took place just after a night of drunkenness and sex with another woman named Britni Glass. Indeed, police had discovered Javon sleeping in his parked Bentley at 2:30am in front of Britni's apartment. When the police woke him he went back to her apartment for another four hours. When he went back home he discovered that Kasandra had gone to a concert given by one Trey Songz. Jovan was outraged that she had gone and accused her of having an affair with the musician.

Monogamy, relatively speaking, is really boring compared to this kind of sordid stuff isn't it? But co-habitation, living in sin as it used to be called, sows seeds that produce a harvest of destruction. Those who live together in "committed" but unmarried relationship experience a higher rate of child abuse, a higher rate of violence and a much higher rate of relational termination. Shocking! Who could have predicted that those who are sexually unrestrained in one relationship would be so in another? Who could predict that promiscuous sex would lead to relational tensions and mistrust? Who could have imagined that someone could be killed over a little innocent fling? Well – maybe God had spoken on this thousands of years before. In Proverbs chapter 2 we read this about the adulterous woman **18-19a** *Her house sinks down to death And her tracks lead to the dead; None who go to her return again.* Proverbs 5 says **3-5a** *the lips of an adulteress drip honey and smoother than oil is her speech;* ⁴ *But in the end she is bitter as wormwood, Sharp as a two-edged sword.* ⁵ *Her feet go down to death.* Proverbs 6:**26-29** *an adulteress hunts for the precious life.* ²⁷ *Can a man take fire in his bosom and his clothes not be burned?* ²⁸ *Or can a man walk on hot coals and his feet not be scorched?* ²⁹ *So is the one who goes in to his neighbor's wife; Whoever touches her will not go unpunished.* And then the entire seventh chapter of Proverbs is on this very theme. It depicts a young man being seduced by a loose woman and, as so many do, he gives in and the conclusion of the story is in Proverbs 7:**23** *As a bird hastens*

to the snare, so he does not know that it will cost him his life. And again in verse **26** many are the victims she has cast down, and numerous are all her slain. Jovan Belcher and Kasandra Perkins join the long, long list.

So, am I saying that the answer here is, *Yes, sex is to blame for these deaths?* Well, like guns and football and maybe even religion, it had a role to play. As we have seen God's word connects the dots between immorality and death. Now, sex in itself is okay. But what do sinners do with it?

What is next Pastor Dan? Well, this one comes from a little dialogue I happened to hear on Pittsburgh's own sports-talk radio station, 93.7 The Fan. I almost never listen to this station and I forget why I was, but I caught two sports-talkies discussing our story. And one of the two made comments to the effect that there is really no place for being angry about what occurred, and no need to place blame anywhere because clearly, the young man who did this was emotionally disturbed. He might have said "mentally disturbed" but my point is the same. Some people chalk this all up to mental illness. That is what is to blame. Okay? Now, there is no indication that Javon had been diagnosed with anything, that he was on or off any medication. But you hear this often, that someone who commits flagrant sin must be mentally unstable, must be ill. Not evil – ill.

I have two observations to make about this rationale. First, is that the Bible says little on the matter of mental illness and this is a very delicate issue that presents real difficulty to people, like myself, in caring professions. Whether we are dealing with depression or homicide, how do we distinguish between manifestations of mental illness and just run-of-the-mill sin. And should we be distinguishing between those things at all? So, my first observation is sympathy, struggle over this very same question.

My second observation is that the Bible entirely rejects the notion that fallen human beings need a diagnosable mental illness to commit murder. The Scriptures do identify something as the spring of murderous intentions. It is not brain damage from too much head-banging on the football field. It is not poverty. It is the corrupt human heart. Jesus says in Matthew 15:**19** *For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders.* Got that? This stuff emanates from a rotten heart. *Oh, but Jovan was such a nice young man. He loved his mother. He got along with his teammates. Deep down he was a good young man.* This is what we hear. But, as followers of Jesus we know better. Our Lord has told us that the problem is the heart. For Jovan, for you, and for me. Thank God our Savior is the King of hearts and can change hearts because that is what we need. We have a serious heart problem. Mental illness of sorts may contribute to murders. I don't deny that. But, I do deny that this reality mitigates the guilt of the murderer. Jovan Belcher

or John Wilkes Booth or Lee Harvey Oswald or Adolph Hitler may or may not have been mentally ill. What we do know about them is that their hearts were evil and they will be held accountable before the court of Heaven. Mental illness may be real – but what do sinners do with it?

That brings us to our sixth suggestion as to what led to the murder-suicide. And here we blame alcohol. Jovan Belcher was an abuser of alcohol. Some would add drugs but that is unclear. We do know he was drunk the night leading up to the murder. Last Sunday I read the sad story of Isaac Hunter, a 35 year old pastor of Summit Church in Orlando that several kids from our former church attended while in college. Hunter, whose church grew to 5,000 in just a few years, had an affair with a staff member that ended his ministry, but before that he had become addicted to alcohol, consuming, according to his wife, two bottles of whiskey each night. There's more. The stories go on and on. As I wrote this portion of the message, Dallas Cowboy nose tackle, Josh Brent, sat in Jail in Texas after being charged with intoxicated manslaughter in the death of his teammate, Jerry Brown who was riding in his car when Mr. Brent ran off the road and flipped his Mercedes. There is more. In 2009, while in college, Josh Brent was arrested for DUI and sentenced to sixty days in jail. You know, as much as I believe the Bible allows and even commends to us the use of alcoholic beverages, if I were living in 1920, I don't know but that I would have supported prohibition. I have just seen so much devastation resulting from the abuse of alcohol. It boggles my mind that we have the mayor of New York City banning large sodas while allowing intoxicants. Seriously!?! And the penalties for DUI are so measly, so puny! Maybe it is my past as a child of an alcohol abuser. Maybe it is my experience as a pastor dealing with the broken lives that result from such abuse. I am not a teetotaler but my disdain, indeed hatred of alcohol abuse is off the charts. If I seem irrational on this point forgive me. I just am mystified by the level of tolerance we have in our culture toward this problem.

It seems pretty clear that intoxication contributed to the deaths of Jovan and Kasandra. As Biblical believers we can't possibly find this surprising. Proverbs 20:1 *Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler, And whoever is intoxicated by it is not wise.* Proverbs 23:29-35 *Who has woe? Who has sorrow? Who has contentions? Who has complaining? Who has wounds without cause? Who has redness of eyes? 30 Those who linger long over wine, Those who go to taste mixed wine. 31 Do not look on the wine when it is red, When it sparkles in the cup, When it goes down smoothly; 32 At the last it bites like a serpent And stings like a viper.* Okay. Well, that is pretty clear. Is the lesson to learn from our tragic story the lesson that liquor is a killer? No, the lesson is

that Jovan Belcher is a killer and that drunkenness is a massive folly. And evil. Don't get me wrong – beer, wine, whiskey – in themselves they are okay. But what do sinners do with them?

Well, we are winding down, but we still have some more angles to take on the Belcher story. Another thing to blame for the murder is fatherlessness. Fatherlessness. The breakdown of the family. The reality that few African-American boys grow up with a dad in the home. Belcher certainly did not. To quote from an interview he gave a year before his infamy: *I really didn't have a father figure*. Again, does this surprise us? Perhaps, behind the epidemic of drugs and alcohol abuse, mental illness, violence and sexual misconduct, is the breakdown of the home most easily seen in the absence of dad. The common element to the story of almost every prisoner in the United States is the absence of dad, or, at least, the absence of one worthy respecting. I heard a true story last week about a man involved in prison ministry who came up with the idea of buying Mother's Day cards, taking them into prisons and encouraging the prisoners to write their moms. He purchased over 400 cards, took them into prison and was so encouraged by the response. This endeavor was so well received that six weeks later he decided to do the same thing for Father's Day. But, to his astonishment, not one prisoner in 400 cared to write his dad a card. Not one.

When we discuss social problems in America, we cannot fail to address this. It seems to be at the core of almost everything. And once again, to someone who reads the Bible, this should come as no big surprise. God has assigned sex to marriage for a reason! And he has assigned the raising of children to parents of both genders. The book of Proverbs begins by saying *Hear, my son, your father's instruction*. Where dads are absent – not in every case, of course, but in most – where dads are absent, where there is no fatherly instruction or discipline, wise children are not the norm. Indeed, the typical fatherless America home is a factory of fools. Still, some of the greatest men and women in the world today were raised by single moms. Fatherlessness is a contributing factor to our tragic story, but is it to blame? It's all about what sinners do with it.

One of the reasons I believe the Bible to be God's word is because it so accurately describes and explains the human condition in a way and to a degree that nothing else does. You read the headlines in your paper today and you will see an overarching message which they shout out incessantly. The news stories day after day declare that something is very, terribly wrong with us. We grope for explanations of the kind of evil and foolishness which the Belcher story represents. And we come up with them. We listed guns, football, violence, adultery, and fatherlessness. And why did we land on these? Are you familiar with the phrase *post hoc ergo propter hoc*? It is the Latin for a popular logical fallacy. It means, *after this, therefore because of this*. Often we argue

that because B followed A in time, that A must have been the cause of B. Not necessarily. If I preach and you fall asleep, it doesn't necessarily mean that my preaching caused your slumber. But, it is a reasonable hypothesis isn't it? The reason folks blame the loss of two young lives on guns, and football, and drinking and adultery and even fatherlessness is because the deaths were subsequent to all of these.

Now, let's look in God's word at Genesis chapter four where we read about two of the sons of Adam and Eve. Cain, the first man born of woman and his younger brother Abel. In verses 3 and 4 we read of how each of the brothers brought an offering in honor of God. The Lord found Abel's acceptable, but not Cain's. We pick up the story in Genesis 4:5-8 *for Cain and for his offering He had no regard. So Cain became very angry and his countenance fell. 6 Then the Lord said to Cain, "Why are you angry? And why has your countenance fallen? 7 If you do well, will not your countenance be lifted up? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door; and its desire is for you, but you must master it."* 8 *Cain told Abel his brother. And it came about when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel his brother and killed him.* You will notice that there were no guns involved. Not even a bullet. There was no adultery. There was no alcohol. There was no football. There was no fatherless young men. What was there? The key word is in the middle of verse seven. S-I-N. And, what was it that happened just prior to this murder? I mean, this is the story of Genesis four. What is the story of Genesis 3? That is the chapter in which Adam and Eve said to God, *we will do our own thing, go our own way, choose our own will. You will not rule over us. We will be free... as the serpent defines freedom.* And the rest is history. The first-born of Adam and Eve is a cold-blooded murderer. Any connection you think between the rejection of God in Genesis 3 and the kind of anger that leads to homicide in Genesis 4?

The Bible goes on from there to describe human history in all of its ugliness and brutality and sorrow. Until one night on a Judean hillside an angel appears and says to some shepherds, that today in the city of David is born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this angel was joined by a flash-mob of heavenly beings singing *Glory to God in the highest and, on earth, peace, peace, peace among men.* We have the National Football League to thank for reminding us how desperately needy we are. We have Christmas to thank for giving us hope. Hope because the problem is sin and the promise that came to Joseph and Mary in the gospel was this: *You shall call his name, Jesus, for He shall save His people from their sin.* Think about that, and let's pray.