

IBSEN'S *ENEMY OF THE PEOPLE* – EVEN IN HIS OWN HOMETOWN

**A sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan
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In last week's gospel lesson from Markⁱ we found Jesus healing a woman who had been hemorrhaging for 12 years, and then bringing back to life a little girl who had died. A huge crowd had been gathering around him on the shore of the Sea of Galilee and pressing in on him. His reputation as a healer was well known throughout the region. Earlier in Mark, we're told that "They came to him in great numbers from Judea, Jerusalem...beyond the Jordan, and the region around Tyre and Sidon...for he had cured many, so that all who had diseases pressed upon him to touch him."ⁱⁱ That's a huge swath of territory in ancient Palestine in which Jesus was known and acclaimed. Then, in this week's gospel reading,ⁱⁱⁱ he returns to his own hometown of Nazareth, not far from the Sea of Galilee, and preaches in the local synagogue. The people whom he grew up with, who know him and his family best, are astounded and exclaim "What is this wisdom which has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands!."^{iv} But then, instead of being proud of their native son made good, they take offense at him. Jesus ends up saying that prophets are without honor in their own hometown.^v Even worse, Jesus finds that he's unable to heal anyone there except for a very few sick people.^{vi} He's amazed at how little they believe in him.^{vii}

What's really going on here, and what's the lesson for us today? I think a wonderful source of understanding is a work by the nineteenth century Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen. His *Enemy of the People* was effectively adapted for a modern American audience by Arthur Miller in 1951,^{viii} and has been made into several film versions since. The protagonist is another

healer – Thomas Stockmann -- the town doctor in a municipality that has recently designed healing baths from local springs and is trying to bring in sick people in great numbers, with great hopes for the local economy. The only problem is that Dr. Stockmann, officially the medical director of the baths, has discovered that there's a significant source of pollution between the springs and the baths, and the baths will in fact make people even sicker, rather than improving their health. Stockmann's brother, Peter, is the mayor, and he's adamant about developing the baths to their maximum potential. The press is sniffing around for a good story, and townspeople are being manipulated by their politicians and their media. We get to see characters in their home life as well as in their public roles.

The first act all takes place in Dr. Stockmann's living room. Assembled are the doctor and his wife and children, his wife's father, the mayor, a couple of newspaper editors, and a ship captain. At first no one knows that the baths are polluted, although the doctor has concerns. An argument develops about whose idea the baths were originally – the doctor's or the mayor's. Everyone is self-congratulatory about their role in developing this economic boon for their town. The mayor, though, wants to be sure that he controls the process by which the baths are publicized and operated. The doctor insists on his own prerogatives as the person professionally responsible for the health of the town. It becomes clear rather quickly that the mayor is an authoritarian bully, while his brother the doctor is ethical to a fault.

Midway through the first scene, after the mayor has left the house, Dr. Stockmann receives test results by mail that prove that the healing baths are being polluted by a tannery owned by his wife's father. The whole water system needs to be reconstructed to avoid the effects of the tannery and a possible epidemic from the bacterial pollutants. By the end of the first scene, everyone seems to agree that the doctor is the hero and the town's savior. Dr.

Stockmann is magnanimously claiming that he wouldn't think of receiving a raise from the town for his important discoveries. The next morning he's saying to his wife: "You can't imagine the feeling, Catherine, to know that your own town feels like a brother to you. I have never felt so at home in this town since I was a boy."^{ix}

Soon thereafter, though, things start heading precipitously downhill. The tannery owner challenges the pollution claim, the mayor cites prohibitive costs for reconstruction and the negative economic effects on the town, business interests begin to organize against the doctor, the press wants to use the story not so much on its own merits as to bring down the mayor and the interests around him, The mayor ends up ordering his brother to issue a statement that the doctor originally overestimated the danger and that he has complete confidence in the town government's capability to make any needed improvements. Doctor Stockmann will be fired if he refuses.

Next, Dr. Stockmann feels pressure from his wife to capitulate to his brother the mayor: "Please, think, [Tom]! He's got all the power on his side." Stockmann interjects, "Yes, but I have the truth on mine." His wife retorts: "Without power, what good is the truth?"^x Then she ups the ante by bringing his professional decision home and talking about its effect on her and their children: "How about your duty toward your family – the people you're supposed to provide for...If you go on this way, God help us, we'll have no money again...Have you forgotten what it was to live like we [used to] live? Haven't we had enough of that for one lifetime?"^{xi}

Dr. Stockman ends up calling a general meeting to inform the public of the pollution issue, but the mayor is able to sway the crowd to see Dr. Stockman as irrationally destroying the public baths and the town's livelihood. He claims the doctor is doing this for personal and

political reasons – including attacking his own brother – rather than for scientific ones. When Dr. Stockmann speaks, he explains how he’s come back to the place of his birth from a medical practice elsewhere because he loves his hometown, wants to improve it, and wants to exercise his own healing powers here. He explains how he created the baths project “so that we might cure the sick, so that we might meet people from all over the world and learn from them.” But now he has discovered that the water have been poisoned, and he wants to prove it to the citizenry. Instead, a formal resolution is voted, declaring him a enemy of the people and of his community.

By the third act, windows have been broken in the doctor’s home and his landlord has sent him an eviction order because enflamed public opinion has led to damage to the premises, and more is threatened. Dr. Stockmann’s children are getting into fights in school with classmates who are calling their father a traitor to the town. Stockmann is fired, and his older daughter is fired from her teacher’s job. The play ends with an angry crowd gathering outside his home and throwing rocks through the windows. Dr. Stockman’s final statement is that he’s fighting for truth, and that’s why he’s been isolated and attacked. Yet, he claims, that simply makes him stronger, among the strongest people in the world. The closing words of the play are Dr. Stockmann saying “And the strong must learn to be lonely.”^{xii}

Similarly, when Jesus tells his disciples in this morning’s gospel lesson to go out to cure the sick, cast out demons, and proclaim that all should repent, he notes that the disciples may not be welcomed in certain homes. He instructs them to be strong, shaking off the dust on their feet in those homes as a testimony against them. But, of course, crucifixion was the ultimate result for Jesus and many of his disciples when they stuck to their convictions and acted on them.

Why, though, is the dishonor for prophets, reformers and healers often the worst in their own hometowns?

At one level, it might be simply that they were just the local kids before they got famous, and they can never outgrow their childhood associations: “What’s this wisdom...that he even does miracles,” say Jesus’ townspeople. “Isn’t this [just] Mary’s son and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas and Simon? Aren’t his sisters here with us?”^{xiii} On another level, hometown people may be upset that their now famous sons and daughters ever left in the first place, and then presume to be able to come back, fit right in, and start telling them that their way is not the best way. It seems presumptuous and beyond their place to do – not to mention destructive of what’s become the local way of life. Dr. Stockman’s father-in-law tells him bluntly that “It’s a serious thing to destroy a town.”^{xiv} He insists, in reference to Stockman’s course of action, that “There’s hatred in that, boy, don’t forget it... Tear the hatred out of your heart.”^{xv} There’s a sense of fundamental disloyalty to one’s own clan: “You’re stripping the skin off your family’s back! Only a madman would do a thing like that!”^{xvi} As a citizen of Stockmann’s town says, “If a man doesn’t like it here, let him go where it suits him better. We don’t want any troublemakers here.”^{xvii}

I can remember careful instructions my mother used to give me when I I’d take a trip back to my suburban Chicago home after graduating from law school and divinity school -- when I was an activist lawyer-minister in inner-city Boston, deeply involved in local politics as well as in helping people think about how to live out their religion in practice. “You can do whatever you want in your work on the East coast,” my mother explained. “Just remember that when you come home and get involved in conversations around here, there are two subjects you should never discuss: religion and politics. People don’t like to talk about them here, especially

in a social context. They'll just upset people, and they'd rather remember you as the happy boy you were growing up here."

Now, this is not to say that I mean to include myself in the prophetic ranks of a Dr. Stockman or of Jesus and his disciples. I'm reminded of the story of a bishop who was interviewing a graduating seminarian, asking where he would like to be assigned as a deacon. Rather boldly, the seminarian said, "Anywhere, Bishop, except Woodside, California." "Why not there?" the bishop asked. "Well, that's my hometown," the seminarian answered, "and we all know that a prophet cannot be honored in his hometown." The bishop ended the meeting by remarking, "Don't worry my friend. Nobody is going to confuse you with a prophet."^{xviii}

The hymn that follows this sermon is "Once to Every Soul and Nation."^{xix} It was the favorite of my university chaplain at Yale, the Rev. William Sloane Coffin. "Once to every soul and nation comes the moment to decide, in the strife of truth with falsehood, for the good or evil side." Even if we're not prophets, we all face a difficult, prophetic decision, sooner or later, as Dr. Stockmann did, and, of course, as Jesus did more than once. Will we stand with truth, though its portion be the scaffold? Will we be the brave one who chooses, or the coward who stands aside? This kind of critical decision is all the more difficult to make in our own hometown, or in our own comfortable environment of family and friends or even in our workplace. And it's quite likely that we will be least appreciated for that decision when it's in our own hometown or the equivalent.

So, may we take special care with our moral compass at home. May we recognize what it can mean to be religiously or spiritually committed in our most comfortable environments. May we make virtue of our faith, even though it may be denied by everyone around us. God of

grace and God of glory, grant us wisdom, grant us courage, for the facing of this hour and the living of these days.^{xx} AMEN.

NOTES

ⁱ Mark 5: 21-43.

ⁱⁱ Mark 3: 8-10.

ⁱⁱⁱ Mark 6: 1-13.

^{iv} Mark 6: 2.

^v Mark 6: 4.

^{vivi} Mark 6: 5.

^{vii} Mark 6: 6.

^{viii} Arthur Miller, *An Enemy of the People*, an adaptation of the play by Henrik Ibsen (New York: Penguin Books, 1979).

^{ix} *Ibid.*, p. 50.

^x *Ibid.*, p. 59.

^{xi} *Ibid.*, p. 60.

^{xii} *Ibid.*, p. 125.

^{xiii} Mark 6: 2-3.

^{xiv} Miller, *Enemy of the People*, p. 115.

^{xv} *Ibid.*, p. 114.

^{xvi} *Ibid.*, p. 112.

^{xvii} *Ibid.*, p. 86.

^{xviii} Ken Kesselus, "Sermons That Work" (Episcopal Church USA, July 6, 2003)

http://www.ecusa.anglican.org/sermons_that_work_6310_ENG_HTM.htm

^{xix} James Russell Lowell, "Once to Every Soul and Nation," in *Singing the Living Tradition* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), #119.

^{xx} Harry Emerson Fosdick, "God of Grace and God of Glory," in *Singing the Living Tradition* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), #115.