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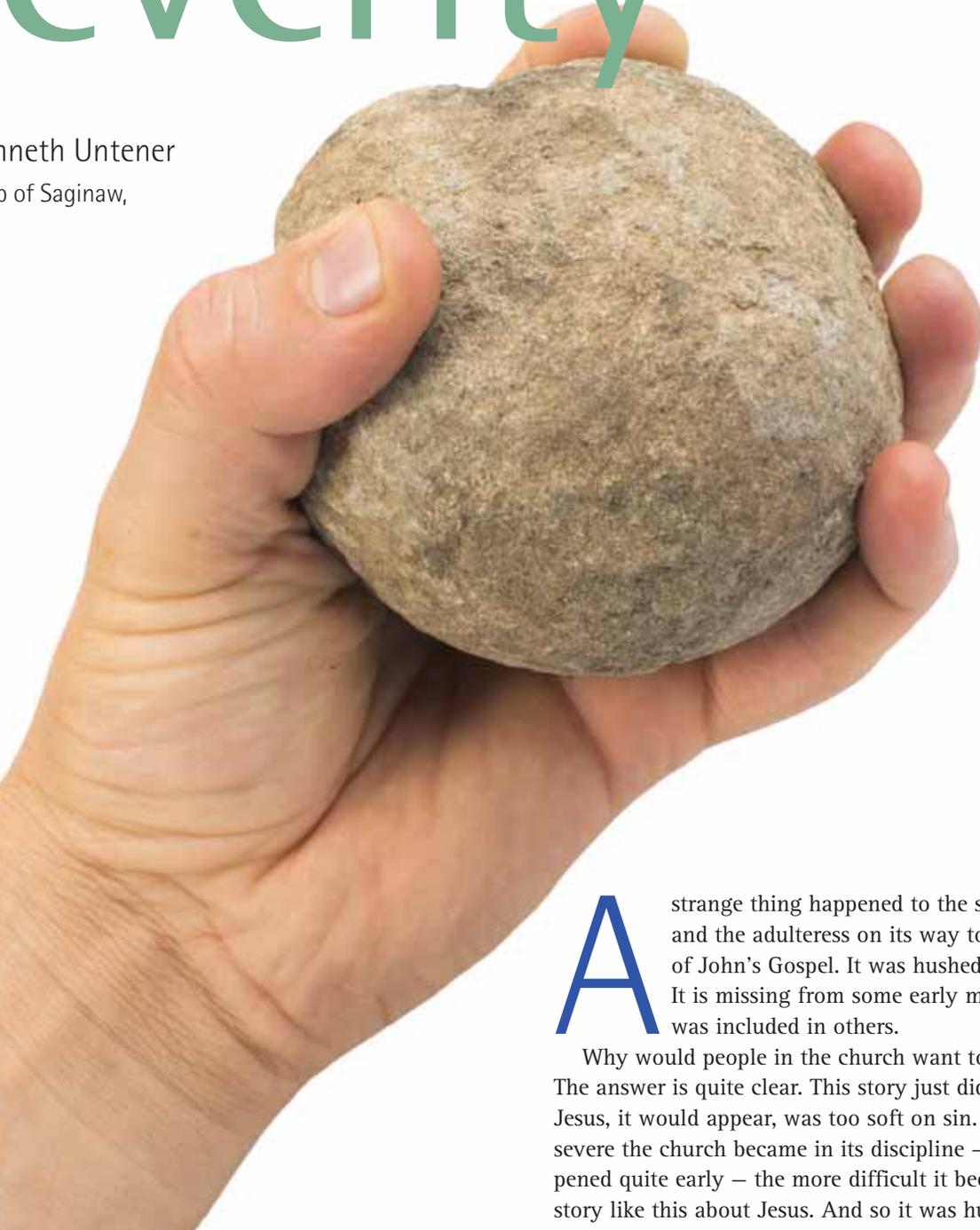
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The Church's Drift Toward Severity

Bishop Kenneth Untener
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Michigan

A close-up photograph of a person's hand holding a large, smooth, grey stone. The hand is positioned in the lower right quadrant of the page, with the fingers wrapped around the stone. The stone is roughly spherical and has a textured, slightly mottled surface. The background is plain white.

A strange thing happened to the story of Jesus and the adulteress on its way to becoming part of John's Gospel. It was hushed up, suppressed. It is missing from some early manuscripts, but was included in others.

Why would people in the church want to suppress it? The answer is quite clear. This story just didn't seem right. Jesus, it would appear, was too soft on sin. The more severe the church became in its discipline — and this happened quite early — the more difficult it became to tell a story like this about Jesus. And so it was hushed up.

The trend toward severity

We can learn something from this. There is something in the church, sort of like a prevailing wind that makes us drift toward severity, away from softness. I am not speaking of individuals in the church. I believe that church ministers, when dealing one to one with people, generally tend to be very compassionate. I am speaking of what might be called “corporate severity.”

The posture we take as a church toward the world, toward our own people, the image we present – all these seem to tend toward corporate severity rather than softness, and I worry about it.

I should point out that this is not unique to the church. It seems true of any organization. For example, think about our country (America) and its immigration laws. Which way has the drift been? Obviously, it has been away from softness (“Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free”) and toward severity. On a smaller scale, think of neighbourhood organizations. They start out with the intention of joining together in a common effort to build a pleasant and happy community, and then they become stricter and stricter. The trend toward severity seems to be part of every organization, including the church.

That might be understandable if the church were simply an organization founded by Jesus. But the fact is, Jesus is more than our founder. He is our foundation and we must act as he did – not simply as individuals, but as a corporate body.

The washing of the feet

The attempt to hush up the story of Jesus and the adulteress is just one example of this trend away from softness and toward severity. In Holy Week we are presented with another example: the washing of feet. How many of you, for example, have a picture of the foot-washing on your wall at home? I’d bet there is not a person here who does. You rarely, if ever, see a picture of this.

Why isn’t the washing of the feet more prominently displayed in the pictures on our walls and in our ceremonies? Probably for the same reason that the apostle Peter had trouble with it at the Last supper. It just didn’t seem right for Jesus to be doing a thing like that.

We are perceived as severe

The reconciliation room over there – it represents the tenderness of Jesus toward sinners, as in the story of the adulteress or the prodigal son. We took that softness and changed it into a severe closet, dark and anonymous, with the priest sitting as judge ...

I realize that one should not oversimplify all of this and one must be careful about unfair caricatures. But the emphasis – at least in the perception of the people – seems to have been on severity rather than softness ... It is a question of emphasis and the way we are perceived.

Not so long ago, if it was a mixed marriage you had to ‘celebrate’ it at a side altar or a sacristy. We are a church that, not so long ago, would not bury one of our own who committed suicide. Even today, in some of our new approaches and programs, we can be inflexible and rigid.

You as educators

What has all this got to do with educators? A great deal. You are people entrusted with passing on our traditions to others. Given the trend away from softness and toward

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It helps, now and then, to step back and take a long view.
The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts,
It is even beyond our vision.
We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction
Of the magnificent enterprise that is God’s work.
Nothing we do is complete which is a way of saying
That the kingdom always lies beyond us.
No statement says all that could be said.
No prayer fully expresses our faith.
No confession brings perfection.
No pastoral visit brings wholeness.
No program accomplishes the church’s mission.
No set of goals and objectives includes everything.
This is what we are about:
We plant the seeds that one day will grow.
We water seeds already planted.
Knowing that they hold future promise.
We lay foundations that will need further development
We provide yeast that produces far beyond our capabilities.

A Reflection drafted by Bishop Untener

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severity, which do you emphasize in your teaching mission? Let me put it another way. Would the people you teach be more likely to recite the Ten Commandments or the Beatitudes?

To borrow a famous phrase, I have a dream. I dream of the day when our religious education will so remarkably stress the gentleness, forgiveness and love that Christians are called upon to live, that this will be our trademark in the world. I dream of the day when our youngsters will find it as natural to help in a soup kitchen as we once found it natural to have a sock hop. I dream of the day when a peace march might be as normal as a paper drive was for us. I dream of the day when youngsters will be able to tell the story of the prodigal son with all the graphic details and drama that we use to describe Dante's hell. I dream of the day when youngsters will be able to recite the gospel passage "I was hungry ... I was thirsty ... I was a stranger ..." as perfectly as we could recite catechism answers. I dream of the day when because of our religious formation we will stand out in the world because of our mercy as clearly as the Amish stand out because of their horse and buggy.

Filled with mercy

There has been a prevailing wind in the church moving us away from softness and toward severity. But John XXIII brought a fresh wind and it moved us in the other direction. It was a fresh emphasis on mercy and love. But we're not sure how to handle this new breeze, just as the early church wasn't sure how handle the story of Jesus and the adulteress. Our tendency will surely be to stifle it. You educators have an enormous role to play in determining which breeze will prevail. You must pass on the tradition of a church remarkable for its tenderness and mercy.

I close these reflections by reminding you of the closing scene in the gospel passage. Everyone had gone, and Jesus and the woman were left standing alone. It is a magnificent scene, described beautifully by St Augustine with the words: "Relicti sunt duo, misera et misericordia": "Two were left, misery and mercy."

There is a lot of misery in our world and it desperately needs a merciful church. I pray that the church you proclaim will be a church manifestly filled with mercy ... filled with mercy. ■

