

“A House with Many Rooms:” The Coral Reef of LTS*

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What an honor and blessing it is to be installed today as the Assistant Professor of Preaching and Worship at Lexington Theological Seminary. By the grace of God through Jesus Christ in the power and nurturing of the Holy Spirit I bring you greetings from the congregations who have taught me and guided me along the way. My home congregation was St. Paul’s Lutheran in York, Pa. Reformation Lutheran in Media, and the congregation where I pastored as a Ph.D. student, Spirit and Truth in Yeadon—both are in suburbs around Philadelphia. I also bring you greetings from the last congregation I served, United in Christ Lutheran in Lewisburg, central Pennsylvania. And I share greetings from the seminary that trained me to be a pastor and then a doctor of philosophy – The Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia. Finally, I share greetings from the various interfaith and community groups with which I have worked over the years who have taught me the importance of deep listening, committing to justice, and putting faith into action.

This day is the culmination of a vision fulfilled, a call answered, and a dream come true. After 16 years of pastoral ministry, overlapping with eight years of PhD course work, a dissertation, adjunct teaching and book-writing, this day arrives as a moment of celebration and profound gratitude. I am grateful for all the pastors and Sunday School teachers who nurtured my faith along the way. I am thankful for my seminary professors and fellow pastoral colleagues who have taught and learned with me what it means to be a faithful leader. I thank Bishop Gafkjen for being here on behalf of the Indiana-

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Kentucky Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. I am grateful for the congregations I served who entrusted me with the sacred tasks of ministry, and who each taught me important lessons about what it means to serve God and God's people in different cultures, in different locations, and with different groups of people.

I am grateful to my parents Carl and Peggy who instilled in me not just a deep and abiding love of the church, but a passion for public speaking and music – all of which have been the parallel trajectories of my life. My in-laws, Jim and Carolyn, have been my other set of parents for more than half my life now, and God knows how much support they have provided me and my family along this journey that has brought me to this place. And now I am in this place, celebrating with my husband Jim who has taught me what love, affection, passion and devotion looks like stretched out over more than twenty years. You have shown me what personal sacrifice truly looks like.

And my children Rachel and Benjamin who have been PKs – pastor's kids in three churches, and now are PKs of a different kind – Professor's Kids. As I've answered God's call, you've had to adjust to four moves, different schools, and leaving behind the friends and church you loved. But you have always put your best foot forward, you've trusted in us and in God, and given us moments of laughter and hugs along the way. I am grateful to God for the three of you, that you have so willingly accompanied me and rallied around me on this journey.

This journey has led us to Lexington and I am so filled with joy to be able to do what I love to do – to preach and teach, and to teach preaching and worship. And to be able to do this with a faculty – Rich, Jerry, Barbara and Emily – who I have come to regard not just as close colleagues but genuine friends. This is a blessing beyond measure. I am so grateful for the staff of this seminary who have done everything they could to help me and my family transition smoothly and to feel welcomed. I am appreciative of the work of the LTS Board and their diligence in ensuring the solid governance of this institution. And I am indebted to President Charisse Gillett who has been a model for me of strong and prudent leadership, as well as having a pastor's heart and mind for raising up leaders for the church.

In the months since I've begun here at LTS, and especially this last week when I've had the pleasure of meeting students in person, I have been struck by the reach of this seminary across this country. I remember when I first interviewed here nearly a year ago and seeing

the board right out here in the hall with the pictures of the students and where they are located on the map. Taken together, we might say that Lexington Theological Seminary is like a vast coral reef network that might not be immediately visible if you're just looking out over the surface of the water, but is a vital part of the ecosystem of the Christian Church.

You may have noticed the piece of coral handed out to each of you before the service. This coral used to be part of a reef on the ocean floor. What you hold in your hand are pieces that were collected from beaches where bits of coral washed up on the sand. You can't tell it now, because it looks like just a piece of rock or stone, but this used to be a living organism. We might say that coral is like a "living stone."

Peter said in his letter, "Come to [Jesus], a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house," (1 Peter 2:4). *What does it mean to be a living stone? How can a stone be alive?*

"Corals are tiny invertebrates that [live] in symbiosis with tiny, microscopic algae called zooxanthellae, which live inside the coral's tissue. (The zooxanthellae provide food to the coral by converting sunlight into energy.) Corals build up hard exoskeletons made of layers of secreted calcium carbonate, which form the reef."¹ The structure is sturdy yet porous, allowing water to flow through it, absorbing nutrients and housing microscopic life forms.

If you look closely at your piece of coral you can see the pattern of the calcium carbonate of the coral's tissue that housed all those zooxanthellae. We might say that the church of Jesus Christ is like a coral reef -- a spiritual house of living stones. We each are nurtured by this community, this ecosystem of faith, and we each help to build God's kingdom that welcomes all people.

Coral reefs provide habitat, food and spawning grounds for countless species of fish and ocean plants. About one-third of everything that lives in the ocean lives in a coral reef. "In a healthy reef, you can see everything from tiny seahorses to big sharks swimming amid a network of coral as intricate as a medieval cathedral."²

It reminds me of our reading from John's gospel: "In my Father's house there are many dwelling places," (John 14:2). We might say that God's kingdom is like a coral reef, because there are many dwelling places for all that live in the reef. So the structure of teaching

we provide here at LTS is like a being connected to the network of coral reefs – with students and pastors tucked into those niches all across the country, the world even – all of us supporting the life of countless churches, ministries and faith-based organizations and agencies.

And the significance of the coral reef is not just for the church. God’s coral reef is a vital support for the secular world as well. There are innumerable fish that swim in the waters of our coral reef, benefiting from the lives and work of our parishioners living their vocation in the secular world whose values are formed by their faith. Each person has different gifts and talents, and we all contribute to God’s plan to make this a thriving, colorful ecosystem of human community.

But like the coral reefs in our planet’s oceans, church ecosystems are sensitive to systemic and environmental conditions. *Time* magazine featured an article a few years ago about a global effort to study and photodocument coral reefs using state-of-the-art technology.³

What they’ve found is that coral reefs are suffering from destruction and a process called “bleaching” where the zooxanthellae die and the coral loses its color. The *Time* article listed several reasons why coral reefs are dying – overfishing, coastal pollution and development, global warming and ocean acidification are all having detrimental effects on our oceans’ coral reefs. Seventy-five percent of the world’s reefs are threatened. In some locations coral cover has dropped from 80% to 13% over the course of the last twenty-five years.

A parallel can be seen in the state of our churches as well. The ecosystems of faith that used to thrive in our societies are now finding the conditions around us to be increasingly hostile to the life of the church. And as with the coral reefs, there is a complex interplay of reasons for the diminishment of our churches. Our society has become more secularized, which means that it has less respect for the sacred. The mysteries of faith don’t always compete well with the miracles of technology.

There’s also competition for parishioners’ time – we’re being overfished, so to speak. Our jobs require people to work on Sundays, or do work that makes us so exhausted we can’t even get to church on Sunday mornings. Children’s sports teams schedule practices and games for Sundays, too.

And there is the “pollution” of commerce which is littering our Sabbath-time. Sunday is a prime shopping day and there are

probably more people in stores than there are in churches on Sunday mornings these days. Not to mention the 24-hour, 7-day a week availability of social media.

There is also the growth of “the nones” -- folks who indicate adherence to “no religion” in surveys. We’re in a time where two and three generations have never set foot inside a house of worship, except for maybe a funeral or wedding. Churches are perceived as irrelevant by a growing number of people.

What many do not realize, however, is just how valuable the church is to society, similarly to the way coral reefs are not often recognized for just how much they contribute to our food supply, our economies, and even our medical treatments. There are foods and medicines that we receive from coral reefs that we can’t get any other way. In the same way, the church throughout history to the present day has been responsible for much good that most people take for granted, and would likely not have been able to access any other way.

Charity toward widows and orphans, hospitals, public health and education, the abolition of slavery, the Civil Rights Movement, not to mention the raising of children with strong moral and ethical values, all have their origins in churches and other houses of worship, and have had a profoundly positive impact on human society over the centuries. This is not to say that the church has not had its problems, and we must, of course, recognize the way in which the church has abused its power over the centuries and even today.

But when following the call of Jesus, churches contribute much to their communities and society in general by assisting the poor and prophetically addressing the causes of poverty. Churches respond to natural disasters, provide relief to refugees, advocate for society’s most vulnerable citizens, provide counseling and spiritual direction, distribute food and clothing, and provide leadership and resources for addressing justice issues. Not to mention, some of the greatest leaders who have lifted up and inspired humanity’s highest ideals have arisen from the church.

The *Time* article noted that public attention to the plight of coral reefs has suffered because the reefs are not easy to see. Very few people ever swim amid coral reefs. And there hasn’t been much photo-documentation of these fragile ecosystems. The good work of churches, too, sometimes goes unnoticed and underappreciated. Less and less people are coming into our churches, swimming amid our coral reefs, so to speak.

But now there are 360-degree cameras they are using to photograph the ocean floor (similarly to the way Google Earth has shown us the surface of our planet in astounding ways). People who study coral reefs know: we will not save what we do not love. And oceanographers want us to fall in love with our coral reefs so that as a human species we will take steps to preserve what is left.

As church leaders, we want people to fall in love with our churches – *even if they do not attend them*. We want people to see the church as a vital institution for a community. People will not save what they do not love. That’s why it’s so important to tell people what goes on in our churches and faith communities, what great work we do in serving those in need and upholding the values that keep a society healthy.

That’s why we put so much effort into creating our courses and training you, our students, to be the vital leaders the church needs. We need to shout from the rooftops (or, in this case, the “reeftops”) what we as a seminary do, and what your church does, and why we’re here. It’s about documenting and making a case for the validity and value of our faith ecosystem within the larger environment in which we are located. Not only that, but we are modelling for people what it means to be “living stones” built into Christ as a spiritual house.

It is especially important because the waters in which we swim are becoming increasingly toxic. It’s not just from the rhetoric of hatred but because of the actions and decrees and legislation of some who would actually be quite happy with a bleached-white coral reef, if you understand what I mean. There are many who have been very clear that they would much prefer a coral reef where the variety of colors and shapes and sizes and religions and sexual orientations would simply be reduced to a few select pedigree fish floating across a homogenous pale-white landscape devoid of any diversity.

Of course we know what kind of world would result from what they are legislating, and the walls they want to erect, and the climate-change cancer they want to metastacize, the genitalia they want to grab and use and control – we know *that* world is one that leads to death. A bleached coral reef is a dead coral reef. We know that. But for some, the fear and hatred and anger have distorted hearts and minds to such a degree that the water has become too hot, too toxic for life to survive.

Some of you here know what it’s like to wonder and worry if what you love, who you love, is going to survive. Some of you are wondering and worrying if your church is going to survive. From what

I've heard there was a time when you weren't even sure if this seminary was going to survive.

But like the scientists and environmental activists who are not giving up, even when all signs seem to point to despair, this seminary did not give up. Because God does not give up! You have saved what you love, because you knew it was a place worth saving. The coral reef of LTS looks much different than it did six year ago, but the fish are still schooling in aren't they? LTS is a house with many rooms where our students, faculty and staff can find a spiritual dwelling place and have their diverse gifts and talents valued. A place where they can encounter the welcoming presence of God. A place where they can be empowered to protect and preserve the vulnerable within the reef, even the reef itself.

Psalm 31 also reinforces the imagery of God as a sanctuary of rock, strong and protective—"In you, O Lord, I seek refuge . . . Be a rock of refuge for me, a strong fortress to save me. You are indeed my rock and my fortress" (Psalm 31:1, 2-3). God's kingdom is like a strong coral reef that hosts a dazzling array of life-forms. And just like the fish that swim around the coral reef, we are nurtured and protected by God through the church that gives us a spiritual home.

What a thriving, bustling coral reef we are! And that's the way churches should be – like a house with many rooms welcoming all people in a symbiotic relationship of mutual care and service. We must be activists for the coral reefs of faith, even as we work to preserve and protect the actual coral reefs in God's Creation. Because they are "precious in God's sight."

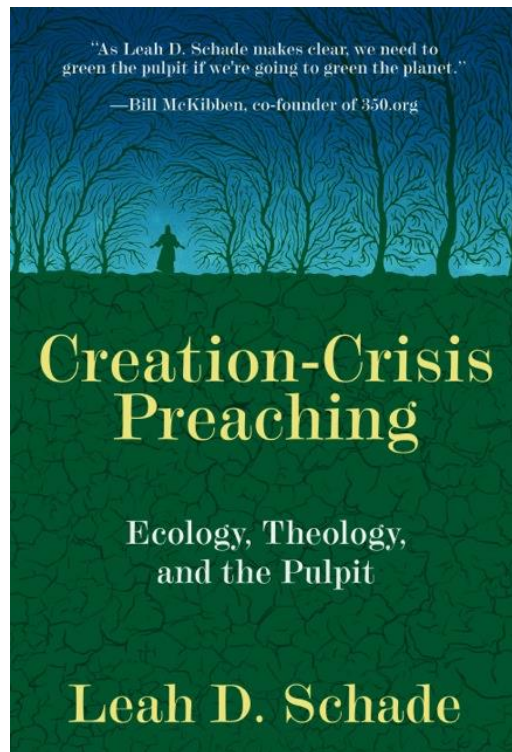
I want you to remember that every time you look at your piece of coral. You are an important part of God's ecosystem of faith. God provides you with protection and guidance and unconditional love. You help to build the coral reef by adding yourself as a living stone. Come to God, a living stone. It doesn't matter what your income level is, where you work, what gender you love, what age you are, what color your fish is, what accomplishments you've achieved or what mistakes you've made. You are chosen and precious in God's sight. And like living stones, let yourselves be built into the spiritual house of many rooms – God's coral reef of faith. Amen!

Endnotes

¹ Bryan Walsh, "Ocean View," *Time*, April 14, 2014, p. 43.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*



Creation-Crisis Preaching helps connect your faith with your love of God's Creation and gives you the tools to create sermons that address the most pressing environmental issues of our time. Available at Chalice Press.