Ecological Justice Tour in North Carolina
August 12-13, 2018

by
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Just over a year ago, the Reverend William Barber II stepped down from his post as President of the North Carolina NAACP to lead a National Moral Revival in the spirit of Martin Luther King. Barber’s Poor People’s Campaign brings together those with a longstanding commitment to social justice in partnership with the Kairos Center at Union Theological Seminary in New York City.

It was at Union that Barber met Karenna Gore, now Director of the Center for Earth Ethics, and just a year ago met Al Gore at a gathering in Alabama. Barber extended an invitation to Karenna and Al Gore to join him on an Ecological Justice Organizing Tour in North Carolina from August 12-13, 2018.

The three toured North Carolina and heard firsthand accounts from those personally impacted by ecological injustice in their communities. On Sunday, August 12th, they held a “Spiritual Call to Address Ecological Devastation” at Greenleaf Christian Church in Goldsboro. The tour culminated in a Mass Meeting: An Ecological Justice Moral Monday at historic Shiloh Baptist Church in downtown Greensboro.

As I made my way to Shiloh early, I could see that all the parking lots were already full as over 1,000 people came from all walks of life to bear witness to an extraordinary moment of "integral ecology," where the voice of an oppressed Earth and the voices of those oppressed by Earth devastation were heard in unison.

The pre-event came alive with song and choral chanting. Shiloh’s Rev. W. Steven Allen, Sr. opened with an invocation prayer on the sanctity of Creation. Clergy long involved in social justice issues in Greensboro followed with a choral reading. One felt these words from Pope Francis:

"An authentic humanity, calling for a new synthesis, seems to dwell in the midst of our technological culture, almost unnoticed, like a mist seeping gently beneath a closed door. Will the promise last, in spite of everything, with all that is authentic rising up in stubborn resistance?"¹

Impacted local community members told their stories, including stories of the Atlantic Coast Pipeline in Robeson County, stories of hog waste contamination in Goldsboro, and the coal ash spill in Belews Creek. Heartfelt stories of illness and loss, told with courage

and a solidarity with suffering. Stories of indignities where the ill effects of environmental devastation were felt disproportionately by the poor.

Reverend Nelson Johnson spoke, the founder of The Beloved Community in Greensboro that launched the Truth and Reconciliation process in the aftermath of the Klan/Nazi shootings in 1979. Johnson’s Faith Community Church installed solar panels on the roof of the Church in a test case against Duke Energy’s monopoly in North Carolina.

Reverend Barber and Al Gore spoke last and it was almost astonishing to see the coming together of these two men, one who has spoken so courageously on behalf of oppressed people, the other who has spoken so courageously on behalf of an oppressed Earth. I was reminded of these words by Greensboro native Thomas Berry and Martin Luther King, as if intertwined:

“The time has come to lower our voices, to cease imposing our mechanistic patterns on… the earth, to resist the impulse to control, to command, to force, to oppress, to begin quite humbly to follow the guidance of the larger community on which all life depends.”

“Our goal is to create a beloved community and this will require a qualitative change in our souls as well as a quantitative change in our lives.”

As Gore got up to speak, he was visibly moved. In all his years of trying to bring awareness to the ecological crisis that we face, he said he had moments of despair and moments of hope, but never did he feel more hopeful than he did at this moment. Sitting in the room, I felt the same deep hope. Finally, there was a sense of wholeness, a sense of the deep interrelatedness of all beings, a sense of moral imagination that underlies all. A historic moment that went deep and brought forth a new energy for this critical time. One had the feeling that the universe was evolving toward Love and the feet had hit the ground.

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3 Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.