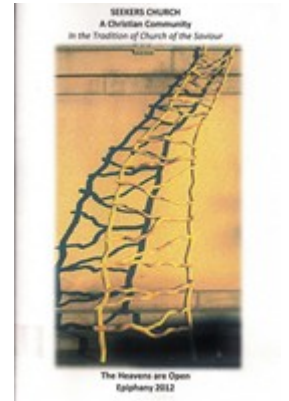


“Mountain Top Coal Mining” by Dottie Bocksteigel

29 January 2012



The 4th Sunday after Epiphany

This summer I visited the town of Appalachia in Wise county which is in the south west corner of Virginia. There I met with a group called the Southern Appalachian Mountain Stewards. They are trying to protect the mountain above their town from being blown apart by mountain top coal mining. One third of their county has already been destroyed by this kind of mining with dire results for the people who live in the area. They are being poisoned by toxic coal dust, and their water is being polluted with toxic waste containing dozens of heavy metals including arsenic, lead, mercury and selenium. Families who were once surrounded by some of the most beautiful land on earth are now fighting to save what is left of their mountains and to save their own lives.

Coal companies doing mountaintop removal mining begin by removing all vegetation and topsoil which also effectively removes all wild life. Then three million pounds of toxic

explosives are used to blast up to 1000 feet off of a mountain's elevation. The coal is dug out with a huge machine which mostly replaces the need for many workers. The waste from the mining operation is dumped directly into nearby valleys, burying and polluting streams.

While visiting this group I wrote a poem about their cause and want to support them in any way I can.

There is a place called Appalachia, painted emerald green,
With misty mountains, towering trees, a peaceful, prayerful
scene.

The folks who live there find it hard, but they would all
agree

That there is nowhere else on earth that they would rather
be.

The world took notice of this place when they discovered
coal

And thus began this use of land, to dig into its soul.

For owners it was pay dirt, coal as far as they could see.

For miners deep inside the earth, black lung and poverty.

The union came and tried to find solutions that were fair.

But greedy owners cut them down. They wanted every share.

One day a coal man found a plan to really fill his cup.

“No longer will we dig this land. We’ll simply blow it up.”

They cut down trees and threatened every animal and bird.

Then they destroyed the people’s homes without their being heard.

When there was opposition and they got into some quarrels,

The owners usually got their way because they had no morals.

And so they blasted mountains and they filled and poisoned rivers.

They unleashed many chemicals that really drew some shivers.

When some folks said this made them sick and other folks were dying,

The owners told them to be still and sabotaged their crying.

They knew they had the upper hand and held the power too.

“If you complain about us we will blame it all on you.”

So what will happen to this land, I really do not know.

These mountains all began their lives four billion years ago.

Folks watch their death with horror, mountains we cannot

replace,

Sold off for thirty silver coins engraved with Caesar's face.

This world that God created for all people great and small.

Has now become a different place where winners take it all.

But many folks are fighting back, no matter what the cost.

And they will keep on going even if they think they've lost.

And though they don't get much support they are becoming strong.

They understand their cause is right. This is where they belong.

I hope more folks will get involved and fight this battle too.

Let's keep this land for everyone and make their dream come true.

Jesus called his disciples to follow him rather than to worship him. They began to follow Jesus long before they understood who he was or he was saying. Probably they never really understood him fully, but there was something about him that caused them to want to be with him. He had a way of talking and acting that gave them hope The idea that all people have a sacred value, not just the rich and powerful, gave them a new sense of direction.

I made the trip to Appalachia partly because I had seen a movie called The Last Mountain which talked about the horrors of mountain top coal mining and I wanted to learn more about it. The group that went from the Faith and Money organization had a long 9 hour trip to Wise county which is in the south west corner of Virginia.

We met for three days with a group of people who were trying to save the mountain that was right above their town. As we met together I realized that my way of worship as was not always similar to the ways of some in the group but I definitely liked the ways they were following Jesus. I would like to share with you what some of those ways included.

When we try to follow Jesus we can become quickly bombarded with the many problems and needs of the world. Here at 8th day we create missions that try to work with specific areas of need and we work in places where we can do something about them. The people of Appalachia have a very special mission to stop their mountain from being destroyed and their community from being destroyed. They had a personal stake in what happened and they believe in their cause.

They follow Jesus example by building a community where they learn to know, respect and care for each other. They meet often to plan their work and celebrate life together. They also reach out to dialogue with others in their community and the nearby college to share ideas and concerns and to care for those who are affected by the mining going on in the area. When we were with them we made many trips into the community to see some of the damage that had been done to the community.

We even were invited to take an airplane ride over the hills that have been left barren by mountain top coal mining. We also saw the sick streams now filled with poison instead of life. In the evenings we celebrated life with them by feasting and singing together. .

They follow Jesus by learning all they can about their cause. I will share some of the things they learned. . The explosive equivalent of 58 Hiroshima-sized atomic bombs is detonated every year by coal companies in Appalachia.

Over 500 mountains have ben destroyed and more that 1 million acres leveled by mountaintop removal and related forms of surface mining in Central Appalachia in just the last few decades.

To those who say, we need the coal and we need the jobs they can respond that they learned that we get less than 5% of our coal from Mountain top mining, most of it goes to China to pollute their country, and the number of mining jobs has decreased in this area from 125,000 to 16,000.

Perhaps the fact that most affects all of us is that over 100 million pounds of heavy metals are leached into the drinking water supply of many eastern and mid western U.S. Cities. We are also all affected everywhere in this country by the pollution of our air by coal production in general and the power plants that are fed with coal..

They are following Jesus by taking small steps to achieve

their goals. They listen to people with all points of view; some who support the mountain top removal and others who are to frightened to oppose it. Trucks carrying coal for the current mining operations drive through their community spreading coal dust everywhere and they keep trying to change this practice. They are finding old grave sites in their mountain top and they make records of these and turn them into graveyards that can be protected from being blown up. They regularly test the water in their streams that flow through the area where coal mines are operating and are learning that the water is contaminated with many harmful minerals and are finding ways to make formal complaints about this. They make regular trips to Richmond and to DC to the EPA to plead their cause.

As Jesus did, they reach out to people and organizations who can help with their cause. People come for internships and work on many things. The Sierra Club is helping them test the water from their streams, People from West Virginia and Kentucky are working together with them on many issues.

They are learning from Jesus to not underestimate the empire that surrounds them. Those who own the coal mines and the government people who benefit from contributions of these owners have much power and exercise it for their own benefit. They also struggle with their own temptations to give up and just move out.

They are trying to create, as Jesus did, an alternative way of being, practicing ways of caring for the world and each other. They are finding other ways to use their land by growing crops and planting fruit trees and to create alternative sources of power to keep things moving.

This experience of following Jesus and caring for their mountain has transformed them all. They sparkled with life and hope and belief in themselves and in their cause. They were finding that they could do things that they had never believed possible.

They know as Jesus did, that the world does not change easily or quickly and they are prepared to keep going for the long haul. They told us when we visited them that they knew they might not win but they would keep on living for what they believed in no matter what happened.

I really admired these people. They were ordinary folks like us who are trying to do an extraordinary task of trying to stop others from destroying a beautiful mountain and all of the many forms of creation that inhabit it. It was a privilege to join them for a short time and watch their joy in being together and their determination to do what they could to save the mountain they loved.