THE ECOLOGICAL CRISIS: A MORAL PROBLEM
By Nancy Petty, DMin

Editor’s note: On June 18, 2015, Pope Francis issued his encyclical letter Laudato si,’ On Care For Our Common Home. On the evening of June 17, a racially-motivated shooting took place at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina. During the following weekend, services in many faith congregations throughout the world reflected the importance of these two events. On Sunday, June 21, at Pullen Memorial Baptist Church in Raleigh, North Carolina, as the congregation celebrated its annual four-week Creation Season, Pastor Nancy Petty used the text Mark 4:35-41 to recognize the interwoven suffering of Earth and its people, and joined with the pope in calling for “authentic social and moral progress.”

The Rev. Dr. Nancy E. Petty joined Pullen Memorial Baptist Church in 1993 as Minister of Christian Education, and became senior pastor in 2009. Pullen, founded in 1884, historically has been a significant voice in matters of social justice.

This week the much-anticipated papal encyclical on climate change elicited a plethora of responses. In the lead-up to the release of the document, climate change deniers and conspiracy theorists have railed against Pope Francis, theologian and former chemist, for wading into the “political” issue of taking care of the environment.

The Heartland Institute, an organization known for its denial of climate change, got out ahead of the curve, publishing a piece back in May titled “Is the Global Left Counting on Pope to Split the Catholic Church Over Global Warming?” The piece asked the question: Has the Left finally come out with a method that will destroy the power of the Church to cause further damage to an already weakened Church, having been busy for years preparing for this moment?

According to the article, the pope’s stance on global warming is part of a left-wing communist conspiracy to…do something.

Not to be left out of the spotlight, politicians have been making the rounds this week with their own opinions. What has been most shocking in many of their remarks is the sentiment that “climate change is a political, not moral, issue” and that religion has no place in the conversation. One presidential candidate told reporters earlier this week that the pope should butt out of policy conversations. Rep. Rob Bishop, chairman of the House Committee on Natural Resources, concurred, saying, “No, I’m sorry, it’s a political issue. Most people have their minds made up on this issue, so any more rhetoric about the issue doesn’t really add a heck of a lot more to it.”
Sen. James Inhofe, chairman of the Senate Environment Committee, maintained the perspective that climate change is a belief, not a scientific fact, and said he disagreed with “the pope’s philosophy on global warming.” But it was another presidential candidate who got my attention. This candidate said, “The church has gotten it wrong a few times on science. We probably are better off leaving science to the scientists, and focusing on what we’re really good at, which is theology and morality.”

As the New York Times pointed out in a piece they ran, not all response has been negative. There has been significant praise for the encyclical from Germany, “where the promotion of renewable energy sources and increased efficiency to reduce greenhouse gas emissions has been a cornerstone of public policy for the past decade.” Michael Reder, a professor of religious philosophy at the Munich School of Philosophy, said of the encyclical: “It is an environmental encyclical, but not only. It also includes considering the interest of the poorest and those who suffer most from discrimination. Climate and development policy cannot be separated.”

But it is the second quote from a presidential candidate that I want to come back to. The one who said, “We probably are better off leaving science to the scientists, and focusing on what we’re really good at, which is theology and morality.”

Well, I want to take his advice. If the church is going to focus on what we are really good at (or what we are supposed to be really good at), theology and morality, then we CANNOT, and we must not, close our eyes and shut our ears and turn off our minds when it comes to the ecological crisis facing our nation and world. The ecological crisis we are facing is a theological issue with great moral implications.

There are a number of elements of today’s ecological crisis which reveal its moral character. One of the most profound moral issues underlying the ecological problem is the lack of respect for life and human dignity. In 1990, another pope, Pope John Paul II, wrote these words:

> Often, the interests of production prevail over concern for the dignity of workers, while economic interests take priority over the good of individuals and even entire peoples . . . delicate ecological balances are upset by the uncontrolled destruction of animal and plant life or by a reckless exploitation of natural resources.

The same forces that hurt widows and orphans, minorities and women, children and the elderly, also hurt the songbirds and trout, the ferns and old-growth forests: greed, impatience, selfishness, arrogance, hurry, anger, competition, irreverence—plus a theology that cares for souls but neglects bodies, that focuses on eternity in heaven but abandons history on Earth. It is my belief that until we can understand this relationship that exists between all living things, our attempts to connect more deeply with the sacred will be only partially fulfilled and our vision of “on Earth as it is in heaven” will remain simply a vision. Until we can acknowledge that the spirit of Mother Teresa who cared for the poor and the sick is the same spirit of Saint Francis who cared for the sparrows and the salamanders, we keep alive the sacred-secular rift in our thinking that destroys our bodies, our souls, and our environment.
As some politicians would have us do, we cannot separate the moral character or the theological underpinning of our faith from this ecological crisis we are in. To do so is to try and pick apart the stains of a single piece of thread by which we are all connected. The ecological crisis is a moral and theological problem. And while politicians sound the call for religion and religious leaders to stay out of politics when it comes to the environment, I am convinced that the Church’s voice is more critical than ever. Why? Because the Church, in large part, is responsible for the narrative, the theology that has led to the crisis: making humankind the pinnacle of creation, misinterpreting humanity’s role in caring for creation, minimizing our relationship with and to all of creation, preaching a gospel that focuses on a personal salvation rather than corporate sin, and constructing a theology that places more emphasis on an afterlife than on creating God’s kingdom here on Earth.

It is indeed time for the Church—at least the Christian church—to write a new narrative, a new theology, that puts humanity’s relationship to all of creation in proper order. We must proclaim a faith that teaches the interconnectedness and interdependence of all living things. Our “sin” must address our corporate sin, not simply our individual sin. Our understanding of salvation or “being saved” must shift from simply being about eternal life to living whole lives here on Earth. Our advocacy for justice for the poor must be linked with ecological justice. We can no longer afford to hold on to the old theologies that teach of humanity’s role of dominance over creation, that treat the natural resources as commodities accessible to only those who can buy them, that prize a rugged individualism that is perpetuated by a theology of personal salvation and devalues community, or that advance the notion that the physical and the spiritual are not connected. Indeed, at the heart of a new theology is a reconciliation of spirit and matter. It is not only our souls that God longs for, but our very cells. Is it not true that the great defining event of Christianity, the incarnation, is God choosing to manifest physically into God’s own creation? Our new theologies must begin to heal the rifts of our old theologies, and one place to begin is to acknowledge that there is no sacred and secular split in God’s thinking—all of God’s creation is sacred.

I don’t want to muddy the focus on the ecological crisis this morning, but I have to make the connection between the roots of the ecological crisis and the roots of the racial crisis in this country. In both cases, it is our delusion of separation, from God and from each other, that leads us into the collusion of corporate sin. The actions of Dylann Roof and of other white separatists are extreme examples of racism that we can all decry as abominable. But they are also extensions of racist cultures and systems that we all participate in. The sin of Dylann Roof is clear, but in a country where black deaths at the hands of the police make headlines every week, in a country where mass incarceration of black males is an epidemic, in a country where racism is alive and thriving, we all participate in the corporate sin. And our theology has contributed to this ideology—our traditional theology that separates believers from non-believers or more often, right believers from wrong believers. Our theology that has institutionalized a European white church as the kingdom. It is beyond the scope of this sermon to address this fully, but I posit that a theology of wholeness, a theology that embraces the
fullness and the interconnectedness of creation, is critical as we strive to find ways to heal the wounds of race in this country.

More and more I am learning that when, as people of faith, we discuss these complex and complicated issues what we need most are handles to hold on to—something practical to practice day by day. And so I want to leave you with what I am calling Ten Commandments of Caring for Creation.

1. Love Creation as you love God.
2. Take only what you need.
3. Respect all life, every living thing and preserve the dignity of life.
4. Care for your body as you care for your soul.
5. Care for the Earth as you care for your body and soul.
6. Love your neighbor as yourself.
7. Love the trees and the rivers for they are your neighbors.
8. Acknowledge the sacredness of the food you eat, the water you drink, and the air you breathe.
9. Eat one less meal every three days.
10. Do justice, love kindness, and walk lightly on this Earth.

Editor’s note: The sermon can also be read at pullen.org.