

When Jesus tells the apostles that as the Father has sent Him so He will send them, to whom are they being sent? Well, the answer is to the whole world, and to all people. And that is true for us too.

But sometimes that's pretty tough isn't it? Because in a world where we are so opinionated and aware of our differences, sometimes certain people are hard to reach out to. But what if rather than seeing the differences, we saw some common ground and looked at one another through the eyes of God? Perhaps we might be able to work together as a people of hope to truly create a better world.

Mark Webb is a man from Oregon who leads Blue Mountains Forest Partners, a nonprofit organization that facilitates cooperation between environmentalists and the timber industry.

As for why Webb does what he does, in his own words: "Faith has characterized my approach here. I'm a Christian." He has worked as a forester but also has a graduate degree in philosophy from the University of Notre Dame, where he studied Christian thinkers.

Blue Mountains Forest Partners is in Grant County, Oregon, a 4,529-square-mile expanse of forested mountains, farms, cattle ranches and high desert. There are 7,199 people and exactly one stoplight in the entire county.

Grant County was once a timber-harvesting powerhouse. Then recessions in the 1980s and 1990s lowered the demand for wood. Foreign competition muscled out American loggers. Mechanization wiped out mill jobs.

In 1994, federal lawmakers adopted the Northwest Forest Plan, which cut back on logging in the Pacific Northwest to protect endangered species. Fire suppression and clear-cutting in old-growth forests had decimated animal habitat and led to dense, blaze-prone regrowth.

Battered logging companies consolidated, laid off employees and went out of business. Once-thriving communities lost their livelihoods. Parents worried about putting food on the table, let alone affording college for their kids. Families suffered.

The causes of the timber industry decline in America are complex and long-standing. Many people in Grant County seethed, blaming the environmentalists whose regulations and lawsuits shut down logging projects.

A few people, including Mark Webb, decided that anger wasn't going to solve any problems. A new approach would be required.

In 2003, then county commissioner Boyd Britton traveled to Portland with a small delegation to speak with one of the environmental lawyers who kept winning in court: Susan Jane Brown, a respected Oregon litigator. Brown had stopped numerous Grant County logging projects that did not comply with regulations.

Britton went into a courtroom where Brown was arguing a case. During a break, he walked up to her. "I hear you're the one who's kicking our butt in court," he said. "Is there another way to go about doing this?"

A different environmental lawyer might have ignored Britton's plea. Brown told an interviewer who learned about the story that she'd grown up in a

hunting and churchgoing family. She understood it wasn't just environmentalists who cared about the land.

And so Britton invited her to come to Grant County to see the impact of her lawsuits. Brown agreed—though she brought along a friend for protection.

Britton introduced Brown to a local logger who practiced sustainable timber harvesting on his property and used the modest profits to pay for his kids' college education. Shutting down logging would affect those kids, Brown realized. People were part of the environment.

“I can win a lawsuit, and that's great, and on the ground maybe that timber doesn't get logged,” she says. “But the fallout from that has repercussions. What happens to the workers or the mill?” She agreed to meet with local leaders to figure out a different way forward.

Here's where faith comes in. In 2006, Mark Webb was elected to an administrative position overseeing county government. He is not your typical tree cutter. He fell in love with the mountains after coming to Oregon to compete in motocross, and after studying philosophy became a professor, because he felt there needs to be a Christian voice in

philosophy.” He became a college philosophy professor but couldn’t set aside his love of the land. He taught part-time and made sure he spent a good part of each year outside, cutting trees or repairing fences.

He considers myself a conservative and religious hillbilly in terms of the work he likes to do, and believes part of our calling is not just doctrinal purity but also to make the world a better place.... We could be wrong, and we need to consider doing things differently sometimes.” (Hence the power of the Holy Spirit).

Webb brought that faith-based humility to his negotiations with environmentalists.

The two sides gathered for a series of meetings at a restaurant in John Day, Grant County’s largest city. Loggers and local leaders, including Webb, were in one room. Environmentalists were in another.

“There was a lot of distrust and animosity at first. A mediator was brought in because neither side would talk face-to-face.

Eventually, everyone had to eat, and they mingled at the restaurant bar.

Webb and Britton ended up at a table with several environmentalists. They got to talking.

They had kids in soccer or liked to elk-hunt, and Webb was a soccer coach and liked to elk-hunt too. That humanized things. You started to see them as people with different beliefs rather than someone who is out to get you.

The two sides agreed to invite independent scientists to study how logging affects local forests. The results surprised everyone.

The forests, scientists said, were unhealthy—and both loggers and environmentalists had played a part in that. Decades of clear-cutting and wildfire suppression in pursuit of timber profits had filled the forest with small, dense, fire-prone trees. At the same time, environmental restrictions prevented loggers from thinning out the choked woods. Native species, which depend on more open woodland, were suffering.

The divide wasn't between cutting trees and saving the forest. It was between the right way and the wrong way to fix generations of forest mismanagement and neglect.

Through many rounds of negotiation, Webb and other local leaders worked out a plan with the environmentalists. Loggers would thin out smaller trees and clear undergrowth, reducing the fire risk and helping bigger, older trees survive.

The remaining problem: So many lumber mills had shut down that there was no place to send the logged wood. Grant County's last functioning was on the verge of closing. Without a mill, the plan would fail.

Everyone scrambled. Brown and other environmentalists lobbied state politicians to fast-track their proposal so the mill could process and sell the wood. Both sides worked together. Nine years later, Malheur Lumber employs 90 workers and processes 25 million board feet of public forestland timber annually. Loggers have thinned out hundreds of thousands of acres in surrounding national forests, restoring the woods to a more natural balance. Blue Mountains Forest Partners is working to

increase the use of controlled burning—an ancient Native American forest management method—to reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire.

The spirit of collaboration appears to be spreading. In John Day, leaders are coming together to guide the municipality toward a more economically diverse and sustainable future.

The city is replacing its outdated wastewater treatment plant with a state-of-the-art facility that will recycle up to 80 million gallons of water per year.

The water will be used at the lumber mill and in high-tech greenhouses that are slated to grow produce for both local consumption and export. Lumber mill by-products will eventually fuel a biomass generator that supplies electricity to John Day residents.

The goal is to make the city America's first self-sustaining community.

Wrote the interviewer Jim Hinch in the story that ran last November, “the saga of Grant County has taught me that hope lies in our willingness to reach out to others in humility and good faith to find shared solutions to the many conflicts that divide us. I will marvel at the majestic peaks and hardy

trees of the Sierra Nevada with the renewed belief that if God provided for nature to be a way to commune with him, then he will help us preserve it for ourselves and for our children.”

He’s right, because through sin, division enters the picture; the unhealthy division that prevents us from seeing our common cause, or how we are all sons and daughters of God. And what the Holy Spirit helps us to do is to see things correctly without going to the extremes.

As I said, there’s the extreme of the common cause or one or groupthink; think of the old photos of Nazis all saluting Hitler. It certainly wasn’t unique to Nazism though; we’ve seen unhealthy groupthink in messages saying you have to do it this way and only this way on all kinds of levels, from government, to some circles dealing with the approach to the pandemic, to neighborhoods and schools saying this is how it’s done and there’s no other way. It can lead us to see those who disagree as completely different and people to tune out. And then there is the danger in the other extreme of relativism of one viewpoint being the same as any other. Certainly fine if you are talking about how to make a steak or a flavor of ice cream. But not

when we're talking about moral truths. And this extreme can keep us in the locked room if you will, afraid to engage with others lest we "offend" them.

We however have a job to do. And that is to make this world a better place through our words and actions, working together and with one another and helping one another, not perpetually living in an echo chamber. And the Holy Spirit helps us have that balance between unity and diversity, to make what happened in Grant County, Oregon a way of life. How do we do that?

It starts with embracing the fruits of the Spirit. As a refresher, these are:

Love which means love for both God and neighbor. A selfless love like that of Christ; **Joy** which is an interior contentment that comes from being close to God and in right relationship with others. Joy also comes with speaking and upholding the truth, honesty and integrity in relationships, enduring hardships and decent conduct; **Peace**, the harmony that occurs when justice prevails. It happens when resources are shared equitably, power is used for service, interdependence is fostered, information is shared openly and honestly, the dignity of each person is respected, legitimate differences are tolerated, the disadvantaged receive help, hurts are forgiven and the

common good is upheld; **Patience** which is the virtue of suffering interruption or delay with composure and without complaint; to suffer annoyance, insult or mistreatment with self-restraint, refusing to be provoked; and to suffer burdens and difficult tasks with resolve and determination. It is also the willingness to slow down for another's benefit, to set aside one's personal plans and concerns, to go at another's pace, and to take whatever time is necessary to address their need; **Kindness** which is a warm and friendly disposition toward another. Not fake upper Midwest kindness that we can fall into, but authentic. A kind person is polite and well mannered, respectful and considerate, pleasant and agreeable, cheerful and upbeat, caring and helpful, positive and complimentary.

Generosity which is a big-heartedness grounded in an abundance mentality. It is unselfish and expresses itself in sharing. It is extended to family and friends, strangers, and particularly those in need, and is offered not only as money, food and clothing, but also as time shared and assistance provided.

Faithfulness is demonstrated by loyalty to friends, duties performed, promises kept, commitments fulfilled, contracts completed, vows observed and being true to one's word. **Gentleness** is sensitivity for another person. It is concerned with another's welfare, safety and security. It's what caused the Susan Brown, the attorney, to visit the people in the town whose court

victories were impacted. It is grounded in humility. The approach is careful, tender, considerate, affectionate and mild-mannered, free of all pushiness, roughness or abrasiveness. **Self-control** is self-mastery regardless of the circumstances, to be in control of one's self rather than to be controlled by temptations, events or other people, especially when under pressure or in times of crisis. It is to remain calm, cool and collected, reasonable and even-tempered; to be alert and conscious, to proceed with caution and prudence, and to avoid an impulse or knee-jerk response; to be a moderating influence; and to have the strength and courage to reject evil and choose good. How tempting it is to hit "send" or talk over people, and how hard it is to listen.

These tools really help us to go out and evangelize and help, rather than feel like we are going to war.

To that, a couple of practical things we can do as we try to find the proper balance include getting introspective when we have a strong opinion, making sure we're always doing it for the right reason. We can step back and think "is this the right course of action?" Sometimes in a parish something has "always been done one way" but that doesn't mean it's the

right way. Sometimes if we're honest we might be imposing what we want on our family or a committee rather than doing what is actually best. Or sometimes we might realize we're doing something more for compliments or our own ego rather than just quietly trying to make a difference.

Second, we listen. Some of the saints had challenging families (like we all do) and their families had plans for them; Thomas Aquinas' family didn't want him to become a Dominican so they locked him in a tower for a year; Francis of Assisi's father wanted him focused on the cloth business which was quite profitable; Catherine of Sienna's parents didn't want her to become a religious sister but to get married. In all cases, God had other plans for them, and their families had to listen - albeit begrudgingly. In Grant County, it took a little listening too, but thanks to more listening and less yelling or shouting, common ground was found. Even if we might not come to agree with someone or change our mind, we may find we can be more supportive of someone or gain another perspective when we are patient and listen.

Third, we compromise. Obviously there are moral absolutes we can't and do not compromise on. But think of the first ecumenical council of

Jerusalem; some changes were made when the Holy Spirit helped Peter and the others to realize they had to be flexible. It's what worked in Grant County. And it's what works in our parishes too when we're doing a building project or something new; often not everyone gets their way, but positive change happens as people move forward.

Fourth, we engage and act. Sometimes people can be difficult to talk to. Case in point Grant County, people meeting in separate rooms before talking a little more over a meal and engaging one another. Indeed some people will not like our message or treat us with anger, but these are the people to whom we are sent. We can't be afraid to testify to what it is we believe in and evangelize; we have to make sure we don't respond to hate with hate, but also that we don't respond to anger with just silence and fear.

And lastly through it all, we trust in the power of God, and that good things will ultimately happen. The apostles go forth, but not a ton of change happens at first. Indeed many die without seeing the fruits of their actions. But they planted the seeds of the Church. It can be so tempting to give up on other people or the world, to circle the wagons so to speak. But remember just because we don't see change right away does not mean our

efforts have failed. We need to not be afraid to engage one another and not give up when the going gets tough.

Jesus tells us as the Father has sent me, so I send you. And our job is that we are sent with the power of the Holy Spirit to go out into the world to set it on fire with the love of God and what it means to respond to that love. Let us, with the apostles, go forth, having received the Spirit, now breathing it forth to the world.