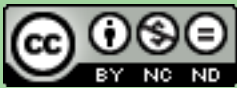


[Bert VanderMark](#) received a formal Fine Art degree from the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in The Hague. He continued his studies at Washington State University, where he received a combined Master's degree in Fine Arts and Graphic Design. He has extensive teaching experience in graphic design and illustration techniques, and is currently developing arts courses for Liberty University Online. Bert also leads Visual Parables, a ministry of Artists in Christian Testimony International, which combines the teachings of Christ's parables with an understanding of the importance of visual communication. Bert and his wife Judi currently reside in Pacific, Missouri.



I am convinced that we live in a culture where people are asking followers of Christ to *show* the results of a Christian life. People are looking for pictures of what Christ means—in Christians' conduct, focus, occupations. Christians need to not only "tell" with words, but also "show" with pictures what the Christian life is. Two-thirds of the world's population are either unable to read, or prefer other forms of communication than written verbal forms. Following Paul's mandate to love (1 Corinthians 13), I believe loving communication of the gospel in the world today requires Christians to think beyond words on a page and preached sermons. We must communicate visually, moving from the trivial, confused, or habitual into awareness of meaning and truth.

I want to see Christians using pictures based on biblical truth, for the purpose of encouragement, teaching, and bringing glory to God. Pictures can be a Christian's way of worship toward God, of sharing testimony with other people, and memorializing what God has done.

My vision for Christians and the arts includes:

1. *Arts education.* Equip Christians to understand and embrace the language of visual communication in the context of life and faith.
2. *Spiritual formation.* Network and mentor the next generation of artists, in a caring Christian community.
3. *Cultural redemption.* Faithfully participate and engage in the work of redemption and restoration, using visual artistic communication as a witness to the surrounding culture.

The work on Visual Parables came out of this desire to see people cared for through visual arts, and then able to minister outward to others through their art. Visual Parables started as a ministry to women who had



struggled with personal identity, physical abuse, self-destructive habits, suicidal thoughts, and sexual trafficking. These were the heavy issues the women I met at Mercy were struggling through.

Mercy Ministries is a free-of-charge, voluntary, faith based residential program that serves young women of any background. These residents, between ages 13 and 28, have faced a variety of issues such as eating disorders, self-harm, drug and alcohol addictions, depression, and unplanned pregnancy. Mercy also serves young women who have been physically and sexually abused, including victims of sex trafficking. In the 32 years of Mercy's work, they have helped thousands of women to be restored to wholeness through Jesus Christ. Mercy's goal is to help these young women find freedom from the life-controlling issues they enter with, empowering them to serve in their communities as productive citizens. While living at Mercy, the women have opportunities to experience God's unconditional love, forgiveness, and life-transforming power.

Mercy invited me to help them make visual portraits of God's grace. My purpose was not to teach art-as-skill, nor to share art in a way that created self-centered perspectives through the art process. There was to be no celebration of doubt, mistrust, angst, or continuous failure through the art works. Such things could certainly be a part of an "art as therapy" program, but my focus at Mercy has been "art as ministry"—celebrating the truth, transformation and the healing that the women have experienced as followers of Jesus Christ.

My focus when I'm at Mercy is to present the possibility of a new identity in Christ: to know Christ through his words in scripture, and to visualize Jesus's parables in pictures. The parables Jesus told illustrated profound and challenging truths. His listeners were challenged to hear, understand, receive the truth, and respond to the invitation to follow him. That process is still happening today, and I have seen these young women engage with dedication and enthusiasm into this process of knowing him through the creation of visual art and storyboards inspired by his teaching.

The art works created at Mercy fall into three categories:

1. Paintings for *myself*. These are memorials, reminders of what God is teaching or of his healing.
2. Paintings for *others*. These paintings are meant to teach others about God.
3. Paintings *donated* to Mercy. These works are distributed to donors as a thank-you for supporting Mercy Ministries.

The paintings the women create are "progressive revelations"—that is, they represent snapshots of growth in Christ, as they learn to follow him. They are also meant to replace confusion about biblical teaching through the process of understanding the Bible through creating art. One woman, following an art workshop at Mercy, commented, "When I got saved the first time, I gave up early on because I thought being saved meant I would never have any problems again and have a good life." The creative process is a journey, requiring obedience, discovering gifts, acknowledging talents as Christ's gifts, and redeeming creative imaginations back to him—allowing and inviting the Holy Spirit through God's Word to exchange, over time, their worldly memories and experiences and with intimate experiences and revelation of knowledge provided by him.

The issues the women at Mercy are dealing with won't be solved by one art workshop, but the experience can be one step along the way toward healing. After a workshop, for example, one woman showed how there is healing but there is also more yet to learn:

The thing that meant the most to me was when he said when I am hurting it is not because I am in trouble with God. I had thought before that God made or let things happen because He was unhappy with me. . . . But I still don't know why if He likes me and was not mad at me, why He let it all take place.

Another woman said, "I'm never alone because God is there—I want to fully grasp this." But she also admitted, "I have often seen how others have been blessed and wondered, 'Why not me?' I am not in control, which is hard for me to grasp sometimes."

What's important in this kind of ministry is to create something worthy of imitation. Provide your community with a healing experience that comes from having walked through that healing yourself first. By presenting the truth through your scars, you are able to be a living picture of what it looks like to be a father, mother, wife, husband, or whatever roles you occupy in Christ.

**Selected artworks by residents at Mercy Ministries
(texts written by the artists):**



The colors of Iran are green, white and red. I am half Persian and want to be a voice for God to the people of Iran. God put it on my heart to let them know He hears their prayers and they are not forgotten. The lotus flower represents my new life blooming at Mercy.

Psalm 18:6

In my distress I called upon the Lord; To my God I called.

From His temple He heard my voice, And my cry came to His ears.



The Lord called Abram to leave everything he had and follow His lead to a land Abram knew nothing about. "I will bless you," the Lord said. Abram didn't know what he would be facing, much like any Mercy girl, and much like any Mercy girl, he did not know what he would be faced with. He just obeyed, trusted and received blessing from his obedience.

Genesis 12

Psalm 65:8

*Where morning dawns and
evening fades, you call forth
songs of joy.*





I love the autumn because of the beautiful foliage. It's such a good representation of how we can always anticipate change and change can be beautiful.

Psalm 1:3b

*Their leaves shall never wither,
and all they do shall prosper.*



God has poured His incredible glory into my once dead soul. I've truly been remade. It is so important, though, for me and others to remember that it is only by Christ that I have been transformed.

2 Corinthians 4:6–9

For God, who said, "Let there be light in the darkness," has made us understand that it is the beginning of His glory that it is seen in the face of Jesus Christ. But this precious treasure—this light and power that now shine within us— is held in a perishable container . . . so everyone can see that the glorious power within must be from God and is not on our own.

These verses speak volumes of what God has done in my life. I was immersed in my own junk before, and it was literally taking me over. I felt like I was being pulled down into the depths leading to death. God always had His hand on me but I truly felt a power when I reached out and accepted His help and unfailing love. I now stand on solid ground through Jesus Christ, MY SAVIOR! Through this project I have made a new positive art memory, no longer full of the negative comments and comparison before. God taught me a lot during this time about pushing through hard times and the old negative emotions of the past. This work is a testimony of my journey from the old to new, death to life.



Psalm 40:1–2

I waited patiently for the Lord; He turned to me and heard my cry. He lifted me out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire; He set my feet on a Rock and gave me a firm place to stand.



I did this because this is what God has been saying to me I that I'm like a tree planted by streams of water. When the tree is planted by the water it sucks up all the water and grows until it flourishes and dominates its territory.

Psalm 1:3

He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruits in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers.



Isaiah 24:17

Terror and pit and snare await you, O people of the earth.

Psalm 40:2

*He lifted me out of the slimy pit,
Out of the mud and mire;
He set my feet on a rock,
And gave me a firm place to stand.*

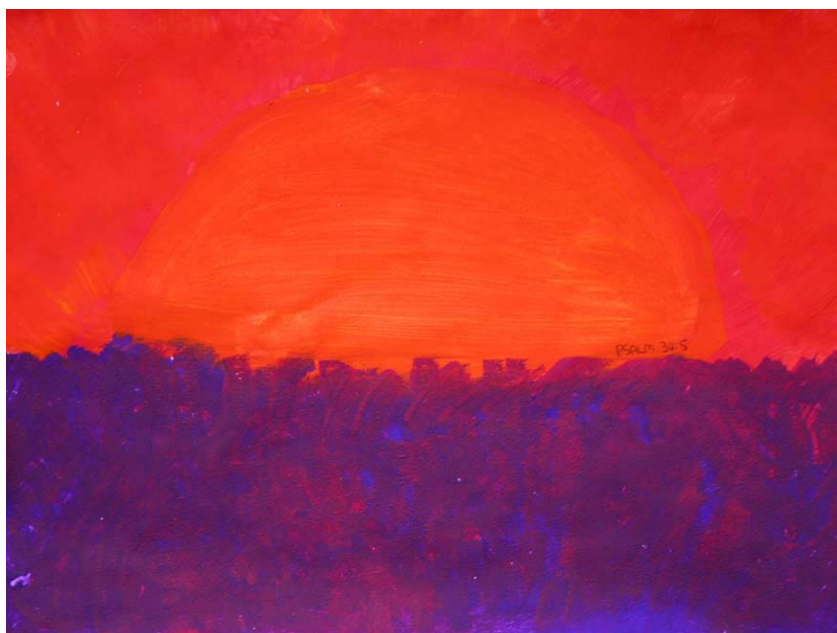
The veil is lifted and her eyes are open to the goodness around her.

2 Corinthians 3:16–18

(The Message)

Whenever, though, they turn to face God as Moses did, God removes the veil and there they are—face-to-face! They suddenly recognize that God is a living, personal presence, not a piece of chiseled stone. And when God is personally present, a living Spirit, that old, constricting legislation is recognized as obsolete. We're free of it! All of us! Nothing between us and God, our faces shining with the brightness of his face. And so we are transfigured much like the Messiah, our lives gradually becoming brighter and more beautiful as God enters our lives and we become like him.





This verse is on my sister's grave because her whole life she was sick and nights were the worst, but in the morning she was always better. It calms me when I'm worried.

Psalm 30:5

*For his anger is but for a moment,
and his favor is for a lifetime.*

*Weeping may tarry for the night,
but joy comes with the morning.*



No matter how stormy and hectic the world is around you, in and through Jesus Christ, your spirit can be calm and peaceful.

Psalm 107:29

*He will calm the storm and still
the waves.*

I don't paint or draw because in college I failed an art class. This is me overcoming my fear of failing art.

Revelation 12:11

And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, and they did not love their lives to the death.





Originally, my painting was depicting Galatians—the fruit of the Spirit. But as the painting emerged, **I became the fruit.**

Galatians 5:22–23

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.



In the past and present my heart has been broken in a lot of places. God, my Father, has seen this happen and He works hard every day to heal my brokenness.

Luke 4:18–19

My drawing comes from the life of Deborah. God has called me a new name which is “pure” and has called me to be like the prophetess Deborah, to fight for others who are trapped by the prison of this world. He is giving me the treasures after the darkness and calling me a new name!

Isaiah 45: 2–7

