

Some of the greatest Christian art has been produced by rather questionable Christians. You don't need to be saintly to paint a saint.

In fact, writes journalist Elizabeth Lunday, if you want a heavenly picture, it's often best to hire a sinner.

Check out *The Calling of St. Matthew* by Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio. You'll notice that the apostle is in a dark and dirty Roman tavern, surrounded by lowlifes. That's because Caravaggio spent plenty of time in these pubs himself, drinking and brawling. In 1606, this hot-tempered artist killed a Roman thug in a fight following a tennis match.

Or how about Rembrandt's 1633 etching, *The Good Samaritan*? It's so down to earth that it has a dog relieving itself in the foreground. Members of the Dutch Reformed Church loved Rembrandt's realistic artwork but didn't appreciate his relationships with women. He painted his wife, Saskia, as a prostitute in a tavern, sitting in the lap of one of the most well known of Jesus' characters, the prodigal son. After Saskia died, he became lovers with his housekeeper and then left her for another servant, causing his housekeeper to take him to court. Messy, messy, messy.

Rembrandt lost the support of church members because of his behavior and died in poverty in 1669 — but not before he painted one of his greatest works, *Return of the Prodigal Son*. Like the sinful son in the parable, Rembrandt knew he needed forgiveness.

Then there's Salvador Dali, the artist who created *The Sacrament of the Last Supper*. Although born to devout Catholic parents in Spain, he was an atheist who indulged every outlandish whim, including the throwing of orgies that he called "erotic masses." Dali returned to his Catholic roots after moving to the United States, but some people questioned his sincerity. Dali may have been motivated more by money than by spirituality, bragging that postcards of his *Last Supper* sold more copies than all of the works of Leonardo da Vinci and Raphael combined.

Great Christian art, produced by not-so-great Christian artists — if indeed “Christian” at all.

In Acts 9, a Pharisee named Saul is on the road to Damascus, and he is clearly no saint, “still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord” (v. 1). But Christ calls him and uses him to do great things. Jesus says, “[H]e is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel” (v. 15). Saul is “an instrument,” and Jesus is going to play him. Just as he plays Caravaggio, and Rembrandt, and Dali. Just as he plays us. (Not to compare the apostle Paul with Caravaggio, Rembrandt or Dali — but you get the point.)

One of the most amazing things about God’s grace is that it works through sinful human beings such as ourselves. We are both saints and sinners, at the very same time; Martin Luther described us as *simul justus et peccator* — simultaneously righteous and sinful. This means we don’t achieve some kind of moral perfection before the Lord begins to work through us; instead, God’s grace is doing great things while we are still struggling with sin. He paints truly beautiful pictures using people such as ourselves, the saintly sinners of this world. We are his instruments — his paintbrushes — and he uses us to splash a wide range of colors on his canvas, including those hues we might consider to be rather ugly.

Saul is a passionate Pharisee who marches up to the Jewish high priest and asks for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he finds any men or women who belong to the Christian Way, he can tie them up and bring them to Jerusalem. As Saul is approaching Damascus — which, incidentally, is more ancient than Rome and the world’s oldest continuously inhabited city — a light from heaven flashes around him and a voice says to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”

He asks, “Who are you, Lord?”

The reply comes, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do” (Acts 9:1-6).

Saul’s companions take him to Damascus, and for three days he is unable to see. Then the Lord speaks to a Christian named Ananias, challenging him to go to Saul and lay hands on him so he might regain his sight. But Ananias is understandably unenthusiastic about this assignment and says, “Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name” (vv. 7-14).

Saul is determined to wipe out the early church. But Jesus sees potential in him and calls him to be an apostle. When Ananias lays hands on Saul, he regains his sight and is filled with the Holy Spirit. Within days, Saul is preaching in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God, and he goes on to become the apostle Paul — the one who spreads the gospel throughout the Mediterranean region.

Paul is a saintly sinner, a man who admits to the Corinthians, “I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain” (1 Corinthians 15:9-10).

God’s grace toward Paul — and toward us — is not in vain. The Lord makes a beautiful picture with the broken brushes and sloppy colors of our lives.

Some churches get this and make it a building block of their ministries. At Saddleback Church in Southern California, you cannot lead a small group that’s focused on healing unless you’ve struggled with the particular brokenness being addressed by the group. To lead a group of alcoholics, you must be a recovering alcoholic. To help women who are healing from the trauma of abortion, you must have had an abortion. Members of Saddleback know that the treasure of Jesus Christ is found in fragile clay jars, so that — in the words of the apostle Paul — “it may be

made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us” (2 Corinthians 4:7).

The point is, we don’t have to achieve perfection before God will choose to paint with us. Sure, it’s important for us to repent of our sins and strive to live a Christlike life, but God will work his purpose out — regardless of how righteous we are. That’s a shock to many people, but it’s true. God *will* achieve his objectives, regardless of the state of our souls. It’s the Lord God Almighty who is in charge, not weak human beings. The Creator of the universe is holding the paintbrush, not us. Isn’t that a relief?

Michele Hershberger, a Mennonite in Oregon, discovered this in a personal way when she was praying one day and heard God say, “Go buy Vonda some groceries.” Now Vonda was a difficult person — a woman who owed Michele \$500 and always had a chip on her shoulder. Michele came up with a thousand reasons not to respond to God’s call, but in the end she bought two bags of groceries and left them anonymously on Vonda’s porch.

Michele forgot about Vonda, except to bemoan her lost money. But then, six months later, God nudged her to visit Vonda. Michele drove to Vonda’s home, went inside and then — for the very first time — Vonda began to tell her story. She told of times of hardship and abuse at the hands of her husband and spoke of a particular Friday night when she was facing another weekend without food. She borrowed a gun from a friend and decided she would shoot her children and then herself. On the way home, she prayed, “If I ever needed a miracle, it’s now.”

When Vonda pulled into her driveway, she saw two bags of groceries. “An angel sent them,” she said. And Michele, who had been so reluctant to help Vonda on that Friday night, never told her otherwise.

God paints beautiful pictures ... with saintly sinners.