

# HEARTS UNBOUND

Engaging Biblical Texts of God's Radical Love  
through Reader's Theater

by David R. Weiss

3

HEALING – ON GOD'S TIME:  
Jesus and the Sabbath

MARK 2:23–3:6 / LUKE 13:10–17

**National Gay and Lesbian**  
**Task Force**



# Hearts Unbound

by David R. Weiss

This resource was created for the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force's Institute for Welcoming Resources in partnership with the ecumenical Welcoming Church Programs:

Affirm United/S'affirmer Ensemble  
Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists  
Brethren Mennonite Council for LGBT Interests  
GLAD Alliance  
Integrity USA  
ReconcilingWorks: Lutherans for Full Inclusion  
More Light Presbyterians  
United Church of Christ Coalition for LGBT Concerns  
Reconciling Ministries Network  
Room for All  
Welcoming Community Network

David R. Weiss is the author of *To the Tune of a Welcoming God: Lyrical reflections on sexuality, spirituality and the wideness of God's welcome* (Minneapolis: Langdon Street Press, 2008). A theologian, writer, poet and hymnist committed to doing "public theology" around issues of sexuality, justice, diversity, and peace, David lives in St. Paul, Minnesota and is a self-employed speaker and writer on the intersection of sexuality & spirituality. You can reach him at [drw59@comcast.net](mailto:drw59@comcast.net) and at [www.tothetune.com](http://www.tothetune.com).

All biblical passages are from *The Inclusive Bible: The First Egalitarian Translation* by Priests for Equality, a Sheed & Ward book published by Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc. © 2007 and appear here by permission of the publisher. This biblical material is protected by copyright. All rights reserved. Except as included within these scripts, please contact the publisher (The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, 4501 Forbes Boulevard, Suite 200, Lanham, Maryland 20706 USA) for permission to copy, distribute or reprint.

Dedicated to

**Michael J. Adee, M.Div., Ph.D.**

in honor and celebration of his 13 years as  
Executive Director and National Field Organizer  
for More Light Presbyterians, for helping break down barriers  
to full inclusion within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.),  
and for his role in helping found and shepherd the  
ever-growing Multi-Faith Welcoming Movement.

## Introduction to Reader’s Theater as a form of biblical engagement

Reader’s Theater is the experience of reading a play script out loud using only the spoken lines — nothing else. The beauty of its simplicity is that it doesn’t require memorized lines, costumes, sets, or polished acting, but it nevertheless invites participants to *step inside* the text — to *inhabit* it through their roles — and to experience the text more fully because they are involved in it themselves. Most of us were introduced to reader’s theater during our first experience of dramatic works in middle school. These scripts invite you to revisit those middle school days as you use Reader’s Theater to capture the drama and surprise of these biblical texts.

Because these scripts are only intended for use as Reader’s Theater experiences, there are no extra instructions about costuming, stage movement, etc. — only the dialogue assigned to each reader.

Most biblical passages require a measure of context and scholarly insight in order for us to really understand them. In these scripts the dialogue is crafted to allow biblical characters themselves — as voiced by you, the participants — to unpack and explore key biblical texts about welcome. Also, because the biblical story (the message of God’s abounding love that runs from Genesis through Revelation) is ultimately an *experience* of good news, these Reader’s Theater experiences are best done in groups of 6-8 persons — so that, *just as in our faith*, there are no spectators.

Whether used by persons skeptical, curious about, or eager to explore the biblical theme of God’s surprising welcome to outsiders, these Reader’s Theater experiences are effective because they do three things:

1. They engage minds *imaginatively*, using the power of the participatory-narrative experience to open up and fully involve participants’ intellects.
2. They help participants *evocatively* make the connections between the biblical dynamic of a welcoming God and the challenge to be welcoming today.
3. They enable participants, through scripted comments, to begin *rehearsing* what they might say in their own voices to explain and apply the dynamic of welcome in their own contexts today.

Lastly, one of the challenges of bringing biblical texts to life today is negotiating the “cultural sensitivities” that have transpired across the years. This plays out in several ways.

For instance, most of the biblical material was originally written by — and for — Jewish persons. (Though even the word “Jewish” isn’t quite accurate; historically, we’d need to say “Hebrew-Israelite-Jewish persons” as each of these words best names these people at different points in their history.) So when these texts challenge *these people* to recognize God’s surprising welcome, it’s an example of *self-criticism*. But when Christians read these texts — especially after generations of both implicit and explicit anti-Semitic assumptions — it’s very easy to hear them suggesting that the Jewish faith or tradition is intrinsically stubborn or narrow-minded, while we (of course) are not. But the truth is that stubbornness and narrow-mindedness are *human* tendencies *not* Jewish ones. In fact, it is our own stubborn, narrow-minded tendencies that tempt us to read these texts as challenging people other than ourselves. Please remember that insofar as we claim these texts as authoritative for us, they

are seeking to challenge *us*. In every text, whenever someone is challenged to recognize that God is “bigger” than they assumed, that person, no matter what their ethnic or religious background is in the text, *stands for us*. We need to hear what they need to hear. Be sure to listen.

Also, we know that gender roles were very different in the biblical era than they are today. This is not because God so ordained them, but because culture and society develop and change over time. This means, however, that some biblical texts are very male-centered and some texts display gender assumptions that we would no longer make today. I have tried to treat these instances with a balance of respect for the history they represent and sensitivity to the way we regard gender equality today.

And, you will discover, in my attempt to have these texts speak *to us* today, I occasionally allow the biblical characters to speak directly to us across time. They sometimes make references to historical or contemporary persons and events in order to help us see into the biblical text with greater insight. But even this is tricky, because my cultural and ecclesial (church tradition) knowledge and assumptions may differ markedly from yours. I try to offer references that are culturally diverse, but, if my attempts fall short or miss the mark, I hope that you will do your best to hear past my shortcomings and listen for the truth of these welcoming texts as they seek to speak to us still today.

Indeed, each of these texts invites us, as we take our place inside them as participants in God’s great drama of welcome, to find our hearts unbound. Yes, God’s radical love can be described, but every description dims next to the experience. One definition of the literary form of “gospel” explains it as a genre that aims to bequeath to its hearers the very experience it narrates. It doesn’t simply tell “good news” — *it bears good news to each person who encounters the story*. In their own humble way, each of these Reader’s Theater scripts seeks to be gospel: not simply to recreate tales in which hearts are unbound, but to unbind the hearts that do the reading. I offer them to a church that yearns to know God’s radical love more deeply in its own life. In these tales, retold in our own voices, may we discover our own hearts unbound.

~ David Weiss  
Easter 2013

# Introduction

This script invites you to explore several scenes in the Gospels of Mark and Luke from the inside, through seven roles created to bring insight to these key passages. These roles are: (1) Matthew, the evangelist, (2) Mark, the evangelist, (3) Luke, the evangelist, (4) a Pharisee, (5) the two persons healed, (6) Susanna, a disciple, and (7) the Narrator. If necessary, to accommodate groups of six or eight, the roles of Luke and Matthew can be read by one person, or the Narrator’s role can be shared by two persons.

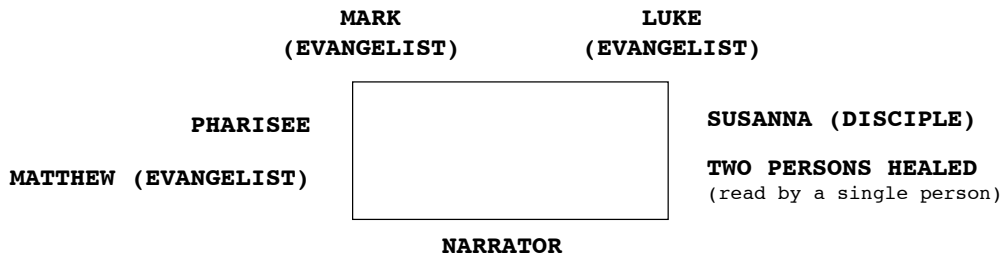
The largest role is the Narrator; the smallest one is the Two Persons Healed. The remaining roles are all about the same. None of the roles are overwhelming; no one speaks more than 10 sentences at a time and most are only 4-5 sentences long. But you may appreciate having the option of choosing a larger or smaller part overall.

**(Note:** Like many of the biblical narratives themselves, this script features male characters in the main roles. One of the two persons healed is female, and I created the role of Susanna, based on the mention of her as a follower of Jesus in Luke 8:3. As in all the scripts, people of any gender should feel free to take on male roles. ~DW)

The Narrator will guide you through the scenes, reading from Mark and Luke and introducing each brief conversation. The Narrator likely hasn’t seen any of this material before either, so this person isn’t the “expert,” their role is simply to keep things moving along. You’ll have a chance to add your own comments and questions at the end, so feel free to free to take notes along the way, but follow the script until you’re invited to make your own remarks at the end.

Remember, this isn’t a play where the goal is “perfect performance;” rather, it’s a series of invitations to slip into the text ourselves and listen for a moment to discover what more we can hear within and between the lines of Mark and Luke’s texts.

**Suggestion:** *It will help keep the roles/voices clear for everyone if the Narrator sits at one end of the group, with the Pharisee and Matthew to one side and Susanna and the Two Persons Healed to the other side. Mark and Luke might sit opposite the Narrator. You might also consider making large name places to put in front of people to identify their role.*



**READER'S THEATER SCRIPT****NARRATOR:**

Our task is to revisit several key scenes in which Jesus speaks about the Sabbath and to reflect on them from the perspective of the original participants. Let's begin by going around the table to introduce ourselves by our real names and then also by the roles we'll be reading.

**MATTHEW:**

My name is \_\_\_\_\_, and I'll be reading the part of **Matthew**, the author of the Gospel According to Matthew. In this role I will offer "behind the scenes" comments, especially about the passages credited to Matthew.

**PHARISEE:**

My name is \_\_\_\_\_, and I'll be reading the part of the **Pharisee**, a member of a Jewish sect that emphasized "everyday holiness" by strict adherence to the Torah. While Pharisees are often portrayed as being at odds with Jesus, their aims were not completely different. Pharisees are the forerunners of Jewish rabbis, many of whom are known for their wisdom and compassion.

**MARK:**

My name is \_\_\_\_\_, and I'll be reading the part of **Mark**, the author of the Gospel According to Mark. In this role I will offer "behind the scenes" comments, especially about the passages credited to Mark.

**LUKE:**

My name is \_\_\_\_\_, and I'll be reading the part of **Luke**, the author of the Gospel According to Luke and the Book of Acts. In this role I will offer "behind the scenes" comments, especially about the passages credited to Luke.

**SUSANNA:**

My name is \_\_\_\_\_, and I'll be reading the part of **Susanna**, a female disciple of Jesus. Although not specifically modeled on the Susanna mentioned in Luke 8:13, this character's voice, brought into this conversation by the author, reminds us that there were women among the followers of Jesus.



**TWO PERSONS HEALED:**

My name is \_\_\_\_\_, and I'll be reading the part of the **Two Persons Healed** in this Reader's Theater. Although a small speaking role, this voice is essential to hear. Too often the voice of those who suffer or are marginalized is simply left silent.

**NARRATOR:**

My name is \_\_\_\_\_, and I'll be reading the part of the **Narrator**. In this role I will read much of the direct biblical material. I'll also help us transition from scene to scene, and I'll occasionally offer some extra insight into the text.

**NARRATOR:**

Our first scene opens on the Sabbath, as we read from the second chapter of Mark: "One Sabbath day Jesus took a walk through the grain fields, and the disciples began to pick ears of grain as they went along. The Pharisees said to Jesus, 'Look, why are they doing something on the Sabbath day that is forbidden?' And Jesus replied, 'Did you never read what David did in his time of need when he and his followers were hungry – how David went into the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest and ate the loaves of offering, which only the priests are allowed to eat, and how he also gave some to those with him?' Then Jesus said to them, 'The Sabbath was made for people, not people for the Sabbath. That is why the Chosen One is ruler even of the Sabbath.'" (Mark 2:23-28 *"The Inclusive Bible (TIB)"*)

**MATTHEW:**

In order to understand the significance of this conflict, which is found in my Gospel as well as here in Mark's Gospel, you need to understand the significance of the Sabbath. It starts off pretty simple. For us Jews, the Sabbath is the last day of the week. And since we mark our days as beginning in the evening, the Sabbath begins at evening on your Friday and runs until the evening of your Saturday. It was – and remains – a day of holy rest for Jews.

**MARK:**

And it's that phrase, "day of holy rest," that moves things from pretty simple to pretty complex; from easy agreement to heated argument. See, Jews are commanded to honor the Sabbath. It is one of ten great

commandments given to us. In our creation story God labors for six days to fashion the sun and the moon, the earth and the plants, the animals – and us. And on the seventh day God rested, declaring it a Sabbath, a day of holy rest.

**PHARISEE:**

Moses said to us, speaking on behalf of God, “No matter what, you must keep my Sabbaths. This will stand as a sign between you and me through all the generations to come, so you will know that I YHWH, make you holy.” (Exodus 31:13 *TIB*) It is God who makes us holy. And by resting on the Sabbath it is as though we dip ourselves into God’s holiness again and again. We set the Sabbath aside as a day different from other days.

**MATTHEW:**

In fact, it is so sacred, that it includes *all* who are among us. Our children, our servants, and foreigners who are with us – even our animals are to rest on the Sabbath. In Deuteronomy we are told, “Remember that you were a slave in Egypt and that YHWH, your God, brought you out from there with a mighty hand and outstretched arm; because of this, YHWH, your God, has commanded you to keep the Sabbath day.” (Deuteronomy 5:15 *TIB*) These words remind us that finally our freedom, our destiny as God’s people, is not something we accomplish for ourselves but is rather something that God graciously does for us.

**MARK:**

And, it is so sacred, that those who intentionally violate it may be put to death. Those who fail to respect it by doing work rather than resting are to be shunned, cut off from our people. So you see, “honoring the Sabbath” is not a suggestion. It is a sacred duty. And no work, means *no work*.

“Keep the Sabbath, for it is holy to you. Anyone who desecrates it must be put to death. Anyone who works on that day must be cut off from the community. You have six days for work; on the seventh day you have a Sabbath of rest, sacred to YHWH. Anyone who works on the Sabbath must be put to death.” (Exodus 31:14-15 *TIB*)

**MATTHEW:**

But does it? How *much* effort constitutes “work”? And what *kind* of effort? The rabbis identified thirty-nine types of activity that were

forbidden on the Sabbath. Basically they're types of activity that are creative or productive, activities that involve deliberately shaping the world. But exact definitions came about only as tradition accumulated – and often after lengthy argument... or sudden disaster. For instance, waging war was generally considered "work" – and thus forbidden on the Sabbath. But, about 150 years before Jesus, a group of Jews were slaughtered by Greek soldiers when they refused to defend themselves against an attack on the Sabbath. After that, Jews decided that it was permissible to defend oneself on the Sabbath.

**NARRATOR:**

In another example, because "kindling a fire" is prohibited, many Jews even today won't operate a automobile on the Sabbath, because the engine uses a sort of "kindled fire" to move the car. So these thirty-nine activities became principles to be applied in new cases as they occurred.

**MARK:**

Similarly, there was a consensus that it was okay to do things that would otherwise be off limits *if* human life was at stake. So medical emergencies could be attended to, but chronic ailments and minor injuries were to wait until after the Sabbath. But even here, there was "wiggle room." You couldn't apply vinegar to a sore tooth to dull the pain; that was "work." You could however, put vinegar on the food you were eating and have it ease your toothache as a side benefit; that wasn't forbidden.

**NARRATOR:**

We're not trying to muddy the waters; we're actually trying to make *clear* that, when it came to observing the Sabbath, the water had *always been a bit muddy*. There was already a rich tradition of oral commentary and healthy debate within Judaism. As these scenes unfold Jesus is *joining* a debate, not starting one. Knowing that may help us hear more clearly what he's trying to add to the conversation.

**SUSANNA:**

So there we were, a band of disciples walking with Jesus. The gospel tradition regularly names twelve men as Jesus' disciples, but it's clear there were other followers besides them. And some of us were

women. Well, as we walked along, we passed through some grain fields. Because we were hungry, we began to pluck some of the grain to nibble as we walked. We weren't harvesting. We were just nibbling. But I suppose you could say it fell into that gray area where arguments start. And suddenly here are these Pharisees questioning Jesus about our breaking the Sabbath law.

**NARRATOR:**

Some commentators begin to question the whole scene at this point. They wonder how far the disciples had been walking in the first place. Because on the Sabbath, to walk more than a half-mile beyond the city wall would *also* have violated the Sabbath laws. And many grain fields would've been more than a half-mile walk. They also wonder, how – on the Sabbath – there just happened to be Pharisees out in the grain fields. Were they just waiting to catch grain-pluckers? How far did *they* walk to get there? Some commentators even suggest Mark may have *composed* this scene in order to address issues that his readers were having with Sabbath law. It seems clear that Mark wrote his Gospel for Gentile converts to Christianity – and one question for these converts would have been, "How much Jewish law must I follow in order to follow Jesus?"

**MARK:**

I appreciate these "modern" insights, but for all your understanding sometimes you people forget to see things as we saw them 2000 years ago. Back when I wrote, we were more concerned with "telling the truth" than "reporting the facts." These *aren't* the same thing. We lived in a world of story-tellers. Most people who heard my Gospel heard it *read*; they couldn't read it for themselves. And as I collected stories about Jesus for my Gospel, I knew that many of them had circulated as oral traditions. Maybe these stories even *evolved* as they were told and retold for years before I put them in writing. That's *how* my world worked.

**MATTHEW:**

Each of us original gospel writers put our Gospel together in order to share the *truth* about Jesus as we knew it – and to share that truth as we knew our readers needed to hear it. Sure, there are "facts" behind the stories; and you can argue about them all you want, but you won't find *us* much help in those arguments, because *no one back then* – not

me, not Mark, John, or even Luke, was preoccupied with facts the same way you are.

**MARK:**

And the point is, this collision of views around how to honor the Sabbath mattered to my readers, so I told them stories that told the truth about the Sabbath.

**SUSANNA:**

In this scene Jesus' first response is to remind the Pharisees that David once fed his companions bread that was reserved for the priests. This wasn't a violation of the Sabbath. In fact, this example didn't have anything to do with the Sabbath, but it did suggest that, already a thousand years earlier, meeting a human need as basic as hunger carried more weight than rigidly following Temple tradition. David's friends were hungry, and David didn't think God was against their being fed.

**MARK:**

But there's something else here, too. If you look at the context in this example (see 1 Samuel chapters 18–21) David needed the bread because he was fleeing for his life. He and a handful of his loyal companions were on the run from King Saul. Now, David would later become Israel's greatest king, but at this point he's nothing – except hungry and in danger. Why? Because his unusually close friendship with Jonathan, Saul's son, has become a source of embarrassment and anger for the king. Isn't that interesting? Jesus uses an example drawn from Israel's history, of a man later regarded as a national hero, but who, at the time of this example, is merely *a charismatic leader who's become source of a scandal – and who lets his hungry companions eat food that's off limits to them*. Sound familiar?

**PHARISEE:**

Do you see what he's done? We Pharisees can hardly call David wrong – he's everyone's hero – but we were infuriated that Jesus had dared to liken himself and his disciples to the man who became the model for Israel's messianic hopes. Just *who* did he think he was anyway?

**SUSANNA:**

Well, apparently “ruler of the Sabbath.” *That’s* who he thought he was. But if you listen to his words carefully, they weren’t just about him: “The Sabbath was made for people, not people for the Sabbath.” Jesus was telling the Pharisees, and those of us walking with him – and also the early Christians reading and hearing Mark’s Gospel – that God’s *intent* for the Sabbath is that it should help humankind flourish. When its laws are interpreted in ways that make for human hardship, the very purpose of the Sabbath is turned inside out. God didn’t create us to preserve the holiness of a day. God created this day to preserve our holiness. And that holiness isn’t about denying our humanity but affirming it. Remember, Sabbath was established as the culmination of creation, it’s meant to honor our bodies’ needs, not to pretend they’re unworthy.

**MATTHEW:**

That’s right. In fact, in this passage in my Gospel I add Jesus’ lament that the Pharisees do not understand that God “desires compassion, not sacrifices.” (Matthew 12:7 *TIB*) Jesus is quoting from Hosea, but he’s really bringing all the prophets into the conversation. As a whole, the prophets are clear that how we worship, how we honor the Sabbath, indeed *how we honor God*, is not a matter of ritual or rules but a matter of ethics. Amos says, “Let justice flow like a river.” Micah says, “Simply do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God.” Isaiah says, “Remove the chains of injustice... share your bread with those who are hungry, and shelter the homeless poor people.” Jeremiah says, “Practice justice and integrity... defend the cause of the poor and needy... Is not that what it means to know me? says YHWH.”

**PHARISEE:**

He’s right, of course. We couldn’t argue with that. We Pharisees were trying to follow the tradition of the prophets ourselves. But we didn’t like his style. Once you admitted that the Sabbath was more about holy flourishing than about obedient rule-following, what was next? Wouldn’t everyone want to “flourish” in their

YHWH says, “I desire kindness toward others, not sacrifice, acknowledgement of God, not burnt offerings.” (Hosea 6:6 *TIB*)

The others prophetic references are from: Amos 5:24; Micah 6:8; Isaiah 58:6-7; Jeremiah 22:15-16 (all *TIB*).

own way? Wouldn't it suddenly be "anything goes" on the Sabbath? Is that any way to run a people?

**NARRATOR:**

Let's continue on. Our next scene follows immediately, in Mark chapter 3: "Returning to the synagogue, Jesus met someone who had a withered hand. Now the religious authorities were watching to see if Jesus would heal the individual on the Sabbath, as they were hoping for some evidence to use against Jesus. He said to the afflicted one, 'Stand and come up front!' Then he turned to them and said, 'Is it permitted to do a good deed on the Sabbath – or an evil one? To preserve life or to destroy it?' At this they remained silent. Jesus looked around at them with anger, for he was deeply grieved that they had closed their hearts so. Then Jesus said to the person, 'Stretch out your hand.' The other did so, and the hand was perfectly restored. The Pharisees went out and at once began to plot with the Herodians, discussing how to destroy Jesus." (Mark 3:1-6 *TIB*)

**PHARISEE:**

See, this is what comes next. Now instead of being out in the grain fields, we're in the synagogue. Whatever Jesus does here is not only public, it's also *political*. I'm not talking about elections. At its core, "politics" is about how any community decides to hold and share power. And if Jesus is going to start challenging how we view the Sabbath right here in the synagogue, it's going to be an open challenge to those of us who hold power. It *is* a political move on his part. That's why we were watching him so closely.

**MARK:**

Well, Jesus was nothing if not political. I'm not saying he wasn't *more* than political; he was. But he certainly wasn't *less* than political. So he called the man with the withered hand forward. He wasn't going to do this healing at the edge of those gathered, but right at the center.

**SUSANNA:**

That is such a good way to put it. Because that's Jesus' ministry in a nutshell. He was always taking those persons at the edge and bringing them to the center, so that they knew that this was where they really lived: at the center of God's love.

**PHARISEE:**

It wasn't a fair question that he asked: "Is it permitted to do a good deed on the Sabbath – or an evil one? To preserve life or to destroy it?" Nobody believed it was wrong to save a life on the Sabbath. Nobody. Doing "a good deed," well, maybe there was room for debate on that. Some things *could* wait until after the Sabbath had ended. But Jesus tied the two questions together, like there had to be only one answer. That's why we were silent. We weren't going to play his game.

**PERSON HEALED:**

But it *wasn't* a game. Don't you see? For me, it *wasn't* a game. It was my hand, my place in the community, my entire past and my entire future that hung in the balance. From the outside it may have looked like twenty-four hours. From the inside it was all the time I'd ever known. In the world of my day any bodily imperfection was viewed as a sign of divine punishment or at least a source of "contamination." My whole *being* was withered by my hand's misshapen features.

**LUKE:**

When I offer my version of this event (Luke 6:6–11), I add the detail that it was his *right* hand that was withered. That makes his predicament even worse because many Jewish rites expected you to use your *right* hand to do certain things. Your left hand was reserved for "unclean" activities, ironically, things like *cleaning* yourself after using the toilet.

**NARRATOR:**

Part of the prejudice that grew up against people who were naturally left-handed was rooted in this "division of hands." Left-handed people want to do, by nature, things with their left hand that the rest of us think they "ought" to be doing with their right hand. So we used to assume they were motivated by an unclean spirit.



**MARK:**

Whichever hand it was, Jesus healed it there on the spot. But he was also angry and grieved, and I report that because it matters. I knew that in my community, the people for whom I wrote my Gospel, there was also bickering over who was “in” and who was “out,” over who was following the rules closely enough and whose behavior was questionable. And that was *not* the truth of Jesus. He was convinced that God’s family embraced everyone. There was simply no one who was not a child of God – so he never asked *whether* any particular person or category of people belonged in community. He thought only in terms of what kept them from *knowing* they belonged – and he set about demolishing that. I wanted my community to feel his anger and grief at their own petty bickering, as though he was looking at my readers and hearers forty years later. Maybe even at my readers and hearers in every age...

**PERSON HEALED:**

I’m not a Torah expert. But as I stretched out my hand and felt it respond to my impulses like never before, I realized that for this man, Jesus, the *impulse* was simply *to do good*. Maybe there was room for debate about a lot of things, but when the time for decision came, he would always err on the side of doing good. And as I flexed my fingers, I knew that I would, too.

**PHARISEE:**

It’s that type of enthusiasm that scared us. How do you explain that we went from seeing his disciples pluck grain in a field to watching him heal a withered hand... to deciding we needed to plot his death? Maybe this is one of those places where Mark is collapsing some history to make his point. Maybe he’s trying to grab the attention of his own community.... Or maybe we’ve seen this type of enthusiasm before. Maybe we knew we had to act quickly or we’d lose everything.

**PERSON HEALED:**

I never understood what that fear was about. When Jesus restored my hand to its rightful role within my body, he also restored me to my rightful place within the larger community. His healings were never just about individual health. They were about communal wholeness. Nobody is God’s child all alone; we are God’s children – *together*. How does that threaten anyone?

**NARRATOR:**

Our next scene comes from Luke's Gospel in the thirteenth chapter: "One Sabbath, Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues. There was a woman there who for eighteen years had a sickness caused by a spirit. She was bent double, quite incapable of standing up straight. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, 'Woman, you are set free of your infirmity.' He laid his hands on her, and immediately she stood up straight and began thanking God. The head of the synagogue, indignant that Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, said to the congregation, 'There are six days for working. Come on those days to be healed, not on the Sabbath.' Jesus said in reply, 'You hypocrites! Which of you doesn't let your ox or your donkey out of the stall on the Sabbath to water it? This daughter of Sarah and Abraham has been in the bondage of Satan for eighteen years. Shouldn't she have been released from her shackles on the Sabbath?' At these words, Jesus' opponents were humiliated; meanwhile, everyone else rejoiced at the marvels Jesus was accomplishing." (Luke 13:10–17 *TIB*)

**LUKE:**

As a physician myself, I should admit that our grasp of medicine was far different than yours. In this scene the woman's bent posture is blamed first on a spirit (verse 11) and later on Satan himself (verse 16). Today you might say her disability was the result of genes or disease, or perhaps injury or other trauma. The world 2000 years ago had far more ways to leave a person bent over than it had ways to explain the bent-ness. Ultimately, it matters less *why* she was bent over – or even that Jesus *healed* her – what matters is the *where* and the *when*: in the synagogue and on the Sabbath.

**PERSON HEALED:**

True enough. But what also matters is that *I* was bent over. Strange, isn't it, how sometimes even those with the best intentions reduce others of us, in all our living detail, to an example to make their point? I'm glad to have played a part in making the gospel clear, but I'm much more than just a character in a scene played out "in the synagogue and on the Sabbath." I am someone's daughter. Likely someone's wife, mother, and grandmother as well. I am a *person*, not a lesson – and that matters, too.

**PHARISEE:**

I'll speak up on behalf of the synagogue leader here. *Eighteen years* – that's how long this good woman had been in this condition. And Jesus couldn't wait one more day? Of course she's thanking God – and she should be – but, please, what will happen to good order if every day is suddenly a day to be healed?

**LUKE:**

Well, Jesus seemed to think that *doing good* took precedence over maintaining good order. And, remember what Mark said earlier about "politics"? When Jesus accuses the synagogue leader and anyone else upset with him of being hypocrites, he means that they're concerned more with holding onto their power than celebrating this woman's regained health. He minces no words, saying in essence, "You don't hesitate to water your livestock on the Sabbath – do you really value their well-being more than this woman's?!" That's a *political* question, because it asks about who matters in this community and how much. And, for Jesus, political questions were often intertwined with theological ones.

**PERSON HEALED:**

Indeed, Jesus called me a "daughter of Sarah and Abraham," a chosen child of God. He named me by what linked me to this community rather than by what kept me at the edges of it. For eighteen years every day – including every Sabbath – had been a day of hard labor. There was no holy day of rest for me. Not until this Sabbath, when Jesus decided that the observance of holiness didn't mean keeping me from wholeness, not even one more day. Instead he chose me to show that holiness is best honored when it serves wholeness rather than when it is used to keep us as shadows of who we might be.

**LUKE:**

Let me say another word, both as a physician and as someone who attempted to capture the truth that swirled around Jesus. His *presence* was healing. We writers like the sensational, because we know it draws our readers in. And while it's harder to put into words, it's just as true, that there were persons *made whole* by Jesus who never were physically healed. That's a trickier notion to comprehend, but just as important to say. Helen Keller, who was both deaf and blind, was never

physically healed. But when she said, "The most pathetic person in the world is someone who has sight, but has no vision," she was speaking a deep truth. It's a good thing to be healed. But the most important is to be whole. Jesus founded a community where everyone is offered the promise of wholeness.

**SUSANNA:**

Luke concludes this scene by saying that Jesus' words silenced his opponents. Just like that. I wonder if that's "fact"... or if that's the "truth" Luke tells for its dramatic effect. Imagine if Jesus had shown up and tried to integrate a white church sanctuary here in America back in the 1950's. Suppose he said to white church leaders, "Is it not right that these people should be set free from the racial prejudice that has held them in bondage for all these years? And is it not most fitting that this freedom should begin on a Sunday morning?" Do you think they would have been silent? Or would they have found all sorts of reasons to object? Do you think the rest of the people in your white churches would've been rejoicing? Or would they have been awkward and uncertain in the face of such a welcome? I wonder.

**LUKE:**

There are other stories of such encounters on the Sabbath. I record another one in my next chapter (Luke 14:1-6), and John's Gospel includes two more (5:1-18; 9:1-41). The details change from one story to the next. In one it's a man with dropsy (a painful build-up of fluid in the skin), in another a blind man, in another a paralytic. One healing takes place at the home of a Pharisee, another by a sacred pool in Jerusalem, another alongside a road. The exchange is always a little different, but the conflict is always the same.

**NARRATOR:**

As we said at the beginning, this collision of views over how to honor the Sabbath – and how to honor God – was not simply between Jesus and "the Jews," nor even between Jesus and "the Pharisees." It was also an active debate *within* Judaism itself and *among* the Pharisees. Historically, Jesus was part of that debate. And in its earliest years the church was part of that debate as well. However, as the church developed and its membership became more and more Gentile (non-Jewish), that debate took on a different shape within Christianity.

And eventually when Christians read these texts – especially after generations of both implicit and explicit anti-Semitic assumptions – it became all too easy to hear them suggesting that the Jewish faith or tradition is intrinsically stubborn or narrow-minded, while we Christians (of course) are not. But the truth is that stubbornness and narrow-mindedness are *human* tendencies *not* Jewish ones. In fact, it's our own stubborn, narrow-minded tendencies that tempt us to read these texts as challenging people other than ourselves.

**PERSON HEALED:**

That's true. From the churches Paul founded, to the communities that Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John wrote for, and on down to our communities today, Christians have found many other ways besides Sabbath laws to measure the "faithfulness" of our members. That's why these stories still matter today. I speak as someone pushed to the edges of community by an idea of God far smaller than God actually is. As a daughter of Sara and Abraham, who came to follow the man who made me whole, I stand on both sides of that Jewish-Christian divide. These stories' texts seek to challenge *all of us*. In every text, whenever someone is invited to recognize that God is "bigger" than they assumed, that person, no matter what their ethnic or religious background is in the text, *stands for me and also for you*. We each need to hear what the characters in the stories need to hear.

**SUSANNA:**

It seems we humans like to arrange people into hierarchies and into exclusive groups. We like people on the inside or the outside. We like to know where they fit in a pecking order. We like to be able to "keep score." Well, detailed rules and insisting on rigid obedience are great for that. But in these stories Jesus acted quite differently. He reflects a God who seeks our full flourishing rather than our rigid obedience. A God less interested in keeping score than in keeping communities open to everyone. A God who chooses everyone. Always. A God who heals people... and who helps them become whole. If people listened to the stories from your community, would they hear stories about that God, too? I hope so.

\* \* \*

*[End of scripted conversation. However, instructions for an informal conversation continue on the next page.]*

**NARRATOR:**

Now I invite us one last time, within our roles, to answer an *unscripted* question (however we choose to) based on what you've experienced in this Reader's Theater. Many persons today find themselves rendered invisible, kept at the edges (or altogether outside) our faith communities: persons of color, immigrants, LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) persons, those struggling with poverty, those with special needs, and more. *If you could say anything to our churches in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as we wrestle with whether or how to welcome those who seem so other to us today, speaking as Matthew, Mark, Luke, Pharisee, the Two Persons Healed, Susanna, and the Narrator, what would you say?*

*[Go around the circle and invite each person to say as much or as little as they wish.]*

*[Note: If more than one small group has been reading a script, this next question is a chance to briefly collect some insights that you'll share with the whole group when you re-gather. Even though each small group will have read the same narrative, each group's experience of it will have been unique, so it's important for each small group to share their insights with the whole group. Otherwise this is an opportunity for a little longer conversation that will wrap up the experience.]*

**NARRATOR:**

Our last task is to step back into our own voices and identify some of the insights we gained. So thinking about either these passages from Mark and Luke or the challenge faced by the church to widen our welcome today — or both...

1. What insights did you gain from this experience?
2. What challenges or questions did it raise for you?
3. Of the main characters in the script (Matthew, Mark, Luke, Pharisee, the two persons healed, and Susanna) where do you see their views or experience reflected in the current church — or in your own life?
4. What difference would it make if every church went through this passage like we did?

*[Take just a few minutes to do this, recording a few thoughts to share with the whole group.]*

A final word of thanks is in order. It is both a risk and a gift to step into such close engagement with a biblical text. In these encounters with God's radical love we may well find ourselves challenged and encouraged, but we will hardly find ourselves unchanged. Thank you for taking the risk.