

HEARTS UNBOUND

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

by David R. Weiss

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SAYING THE S-WORD:
The Parable of the Good Samaritan

LUKE 10:25–37

National Gay and Lesbian
Task Force



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by David R. Weiss

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Affirm United/S'affirmer Ensemble
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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

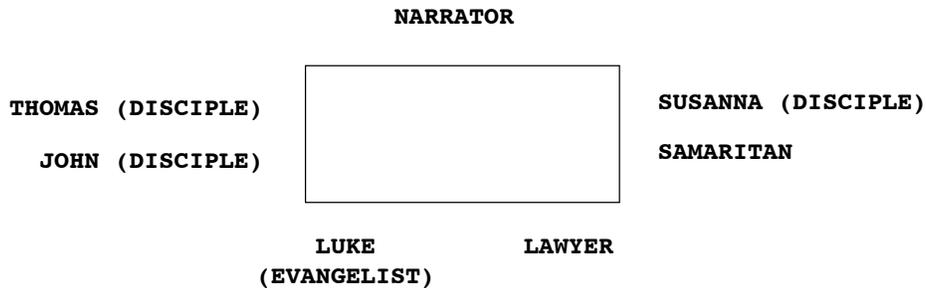
This script invites you to explore this familiar passage from Luke from the inside, through seven roles created to bring insight to this key passage. These roles are: (1) Luke, the evangelist, (2) the Lawyer, (3) Thomas, a disciple, (4) John, a disciple, (5) Susanna, a disciple, (6) Samaritan in the crowd, and (7) the Narrator. The Narrator role could be shared by two persons, or Thomas and John could be read by a single person to accommodate a group size of either six or eight.

The two largest roles are Luke and the Narrator. The remaining five parts are all about the same size. None of the roles are overwhelming; no one speaks more than 10 sentences at a time and most speeches are only 4-5 sentences long. But you may appreciate having the option of choosing a larger or smaller part overall.

The Narrator will guide you through the scenes, reading from Luke 10 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 Luke's text.

Suggestion: *It will help keep the roles/voices clear for everyone if the Narrator sits at one end of the group, with Thomas and John to one side and Susanna and the Samaritan to the other side. Luke and the Lawyer 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 the famous parable Jesus tells in Luke 10 about a compassionate Samaritan and reflect on it 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.

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.

JOHN:

My name is _____, and I'll be reading the part of **John**, a disciple of Jesus. Although John is also credited with writing the Gospel According to John, his presence in this Reader's Theater is not to comment on his Gospel, but simply to speak as one of Jesus' followers.

THOMAS:

My name is _____, and I'll be reading the part of Thomas, one of the original twelve disciples. Most well-known for doubting Jesus' resurrection (John 20:24-29), in this Reader's Theater Thomas is simply one of the Twelve, although his healthy skepticism comes through occasionally.

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.

SUSANNA:

My name is _____, and I'll be reading the part of **Susanna**, a female disciple of Jesus and identified here (by the author's imagination) as one of the Seventy sent out by 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.

SAMARITAN:

My name is _____, and I'll be reading the part of the **Samaritan** in the crowd. This is *not* the Samaritan in the parable told by Jesus. Rather, this is a character imagined by the author to allow us to hear a Samaritan perspective in the conversation.

LAWYER:

My name is _____, and I'll be reading the part of the **Lawyer** whose question sparks the parable at the center of this Reader's Theater.

NARRATOR:

Okay, now we need to set the context. Luke's Gospel is generally dated about 80-85 AD, more often noted by scholars as 80-85 CE, meaning between the years 80-85 in the "Common Era." This is a designation used by scholars today instead of "AD" (which came from *anno Domini* and means "the year of our Lord" in Latin). They use "CE" to recognize that although Jesus' birth *has* become the reference point for our "common" timeline, not all persons regard Jesus as "Lord." More importantly for us, this means that Luke writes his Gospel, drawing on both oral traditions and written sources, some 50 years *after* Jesus' life and ministry. So it's unlikely that his chronology of events is exactly historical – but just as unlikely that it's entirely random.

LUKE:

Of course it's not random. I mean no disrespect to my evangelist counterparts (Matthew, Mark, and John), but scholars rightly note that my writing, from vocabulary choice to literary style, is the most polished in the New Testament. I'm writing what might today be called creative nonfiction. Rather than just chronicling events, I'm trying to communicate them in a way that passes along the power of those events to those experiencing my book later on. That's what *gospel* is, a genre that tries to make the listener *experience for themselves* the very "good news" the story is relating.

NARRATOR:

So it isn't by chance that this parable appears in chapter 10, while Jesus is "on the way." After his opening chapters, which relate Jesus' birth, genealogy, and an episode from his childhood, Luke includes a series of things Jesus said and did in and around Galilee, the region where he grew up, about 70 miles north of Jerusalem. Then, in a very suggestive literary turning point, Luke writes, "As the time approached when he was to be taken from this world, Jesus firmly resolved to proceed toward Jerusalem." (Luke 9:51 *TIB*)

LUKE:

If this were a film, the music would swell here, in a sort of ominous way for a moment, to let you know this is a critical turn in events – and one that will have dire consequences. Earlier in chapter 9, Peter makes his famous confession – "You are the Christ!" – and Jesus begins to talk openly about the threat to his life. In much of the rest of that chapter I show Jesus trying to make clear the cost of following him. And then he "sets his face" toward Jerusalem. Even without music in the background, it gives me goose bumps.

One day when Jesus was praying in seclusion and the disciples were with him, he put the question to them, "Who do the crowds say that I am?" "John the Baptizer," they replied, "and some say Elijah, while others claim that one of the prophets of old has returned from the dead." "But you – who do you say that I am?" Jesus asked them. Peter replied, "God's Messiah." Jesus strictly forbade them to tell this to anyone. (Luke 9:18-21 *TIB*)

NARRATOR:

Luke then spends the next *ten* chapters relating events that happened "on the way" to Jerusalem. Much of this material is unique to Luke (it's not found in the other Gospels). And it's clear that, for Luke, this section is intended to highlight the significance of Jesus' message and ministry. What happens in Jerusalem is a response to what happens "on the way" there.

LUKE:

That's true. But also remember what I just said about the character of *gospel*: this is literature that tries to draw you into it. That's how I see Christianity: *you only understand it when you're in motion, on*

the way. So as we move into these thirteen verses, imagine your feet carrying the dust of the road, and imagine your heart wondering about what lies at the end, and experience this parable between that dust... and that wonder.

NARRATOR:

I'll begin now with verse 25. "An expert on the Law stood up to put Jesus to the test and said, 'Teacher, what must I do to inherit everlasting life?'" (Luke 10:25 *TIB*)

SUSANNA:

Timing is everything, and the timing of this question matters. At the start of chapter 10, just as we were beginning to head to Jerusalem, Jesus appointed seventy-two of us – men and women – to go on ahead of him. We were instructed to go out in pairs and enter the villages along the way, curing the sick, receiving hospitality, and proclaiming the nearness of God's reign. I was one of the seventy-two. We had just returned. Luke writes that we "returned with joy, saying, 'Rabbi, even the demons obey us in your name!'" (Luke 10:17 *TIB*) Then Jesus told us, "Blessed are the eyes that see what you see. For I tell you, many prophets and rulers wanted to see what you see but never saw it, to hear what you hear, but never heard it." (10:23–24 *TIB*). And then, like an unwelcome splash of cold water in our joy-filled faces, this lawyer steps forward to test Jesus.

Seventy-two – or seventy?
Some ancient sources have the number as seventy; others have it as seventy-two. Some modern Bible translations use one number; and some use the other. I use seventy-two simply because it's the number used in The Inclusive Bible. And Susanna is an imaginary character (none of the seventy-two are named in the Bible) who speaks here as one such follower of Jesus, a reminder that more than just the twelve apostles were part of the movement around Jesus.
~DW

THOMAS:

And he wants to *test* Jesus – what's that about? Well, from Galilee onward, Jesus has been doing his own *testing*. He's been challenging the traditional ways of understanding Torah. Actually, he's been calling for a *deeper understanding*, one grounded in the prophets. There, to be "imago Dei" – in the image of God – was to act in harmony with God's actions. And the prophets described that most clearly as radical

compassion. But this lawyer wants to push back. He's maybe heard rumors about how far Jesus is ready to go with compassion, and he wants to test the limits. Some people need things spelled out in no uncertain terms. I have to confess, I'm one of them. I kind of appreciated this guy stepping forward to ask a tough question. I wasn't about to do it, myself. But I was eager to hear Jesus' response.

LAWYER:

When it says I want to "inherit everlasting life," you might think I'm asking about how to get to heaven. But my question wouldn't have so obviously meant that back in the first century. "Everlasting life" *might* mean the life that begins after we die, but in the Jewish faith of my day there was no consensus about life after death. See, for much of our history, including right up into the 21st century, the Jewish people have not had a very clear notion of an afterlife. There are some people in my day starting to wonder about life after death, mostly because we Jews see so little evidence of God's justice ever taking hold here in this life. But it's not something we take for granted like you Christians do. It's not a central piece of our tradition. So give me the benefit of ambiguity here.

JOHN:

That's right. For Jews, the *fullness* of life has usually not meant going to heaven but rather living in *this* world with integrity and passing on their traditions to the next generation. In fact, when I write *my* Gospel – at least a decade after Luke wrote his – I'll use the phrase "everlasting life" in a way that really means *life that is immeasurably full, beginning already now*. Personally, I suspect this is the sort of "everlasting life" the lawyer is testing Jesus about. In words that might be more clear to you, he's asking, "In what way should I live *so that, right here and now, I know life in all its fullness?*"

NARRATOR:

Let's continue with the passage, reading verse 26-28 next. "Jesus answered, 'What is written in the law? How do you read it?' The expert on the Law replied, 'You must love the Most High God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself.' Jesus said, 'You have answered

correctly. Do this and you'll live.'" (Luke 10:26-28 *TIB*)

JOHN:

See, Jesus *isn't* saying, "If you do these things, you'll get a reward after you die." His heart and mind never worked like that. Everything from God is *grace* – freely given. But there *is* a logic to how life works. Some patterns of living leave you empty inside (or worse). And Jesus is saying that the Torah has been given to Jews – as a gift – with the wisdom to guide life toward fullness. And that love of God and love of neighbor sum up the wisdom of the Torah. And *this* is the type of living that leads to a life that is immeasurably full.

THOMAS:

You make it sound so simple. But it *isn't*. Never has been. And it *isn't* any easier for you folks here today. Even the "love of God" part leaves lots to quarrel about. Ever tried changing the time of your worship service? Or the style of liturgy? Ever replaced the carpet or redone the sanctuary? How about moving from an immigrant language like German or Swedish or Norwegian to English? Or how about moving *back* to an immigrant language, like Hmong or Somali or Spanish, to welcome more people into worship today? No, even "love of God" is hardly clear-cut.

LAWYER:

I agree, but "love of God" wasn't my concern at that moment. I knew Jesus stood – for better or for worse – in the tradition of the Hebrew prophets. I knew that he placed infinitely high value on compassion. And I'd heard about the company he kept: from tax collectors to lepers, from women to many others who fell into the category of "sinner" for transgressing any of the many Torah guidelines. I'd heard enough to wonder just what this "Messiah" meant by "neighbor."

NARRATOR:

And so, as we read in verse 29: "But the expert on the Law, seeking self-justification, pressed Jesus further: 'And just who is my neighbor?'" (Luke 10:29 *TIB*)

SUSANNA:

We'd just been *living that question* over the past few weeks. Sent out

by Jesus in pairs, we'd been told to leave our purses, our bags, our sandals behind. Our welfare rested entirely on the hospitality of those to whom we went. Would they welcome *us* as neighbors? And we were told to heal the sick and proclaim the reign of God to these people unknown to us – as if they were *our* neighbors.

LUKE:

Of course, you may remember there was an added note in their instructions, too. Jesus told them that whenever they entered a town that did not welcome them as neighbor, that did not show hospitality to them, they were to simply move on, knocking the dust off their feet in protest against the lack of welcome to these unmarked messengers of God. But my point here was not to threaten judgment but to call for compassion without discrimination: you welcome everyone, period. *That's* what I want my readers to hear. Because the messengers of God almost always show up in your midst vulnerable and without any clear identifying mark that says, "I'm with God, be good to me."

Jesus said to them, "If the people of any town you enter don't welcome you, go into its streets and say, 'We shake the dust of this town from our feet as a testimony against you. But know that the reign of God has drawn near.' I tell you, on that day the fate if Sodom will be less severe than that of such a town."
(Luke 10:10-12 *TIB*)

SAMARITAN:

I suppose I should speak up here. I've been trailing Jesus and this band of people for several days now. I'm a Samaritan – and to say there's no love lost between my people and the Jews would be an understatement. It's probably more accurate to say that neither side misses any opportunity to take a swing at the other. So it's not surprising that when this Jewish prophet passed through my village at the start of his journey to Jerusalem, we didn't exactly roll out the red carpet. It's a long, tired history of hard feelings, and one of the lightning rods is over where to worship God. Our tradition honors Mount Gerizim as the Holy Place where the true altar to God belongs. But the Jews, who outnumber us by far, have long held that the Temple in Jerusalem holds the true altar. And they despise us for being steadfast to our altar. So when Jewish pilgrims pass through *our* villages on the way to *their* Temple, it stings.

THOMAS:

I remember that. The shopkeepers dropped their shutters against us. The innkeepers closed their doors. The families pulled their children inside. And no one offered us food or drink or shelter.

JOHN:

It angered us. "Just like Samaritans," we thought. I was a bit of a firebrand in those days. My brother and I asked Jesus, "Can we kill them, Lord? Can we kill them all?" But Jesus looked at us, heartbroken, as if to say "Haven't you understood *anything*?" But all he said was, "No. No, you can't kill them all." And we regretted we'd ever asked.

They entered a Samaritan town but the Samaritans wouldn't welcome Jesus because his destination was Jerusalem. When the disciples James and John saw this, they said "Rabbi, do you want us to call down fire from heaven and destroy them?" But Jesus turned and reprimanded them. (Luke 9:54-55 *TIB*)

SAMARITAN:

That's why I'm here. I mean, I don't know *exactly* why I'm here. Except this Jesus is a big prophet. Rumors about "the Messiah" are swirling all around – even in Samaritan villages. And as they left our village that day, I was coming in from the field, and I overheard that exchange. I froze with fear at the possibility that this prophet-messiah might give the okay for his followers to call down fire on my people. My breath caught. And then he said, "No." He said "No" with a heaviness and a forcefulness that made it seem like both the sadness and the power in his voice were borrowed from God. And I have trailed this band of people since then, wondering at this might-be-messiah who seems... maybe... perhaps... at least by not condemning us... to have a place in his heart for Samaritans.

NARRATOR:

We continue with the passage, reading verses 30-32. "Jesus replied, 'There was a traveler going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, who fell prey to robbers. The traveler was beaten, stripped naked, and left half-dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road; the priest saw the traveler lying beside the road, but passed by on the other side. Likewise there was a Levite who came the same way; this

one, too, saw the afflicted traveler and passed by on the other side.'" (Luke 10:30-32 *TIB*)

SUSANNA:

My ears perked up immediately. Having just returned from traveling on the road, I knew all too well the perils that could await you between cities. These were hard times. There's no excuse for banditry. But it's no secret that, between the taxes levied by Rome and the tithes required by the Temple, many of my Jewish brothers had seen their farms foreclosed on. They watched helplessly as their families heritage was forfeited. And, especially in rural areas between cities, a landless Jew is just barely a Jew. So robbers were a common enough threat. And while it is true that one by one they each *chose* to become robbers, I suspect that very few of them made that choice happily.

LUKE:

"Half-dead" – that's exactly what the Greek word says: as close to death as to life; teetering between the two. And that's a problem for these two fellows. Priests and Levites serve in the Temple. More than just a job, it's their life. Priests offer sacrifices: they stand as the doorway between this world and the holy world of God. Levites serve in the Temple in other ways. Think of them like the altar guild, the organist and choir director, the custodian and the cantor all rolled into one. Whatever needs doing each day to keep the Temple running, Levites see that it gets done.

THOMAS:

And if the Temple is the height of holiness – short of God, of course – if it's the place saturated, dripping with holiness, well, death is the height of impurity. It's the place, the moment, where life runs amok. And those who serve in Temple have special obligations to avoid proximity to death. It may strike you as primitive or superstitious (some of you might even be superstitious yourselves!), but for these people it was *real*. If you come into contact with

YHWH told Moses to tell these things to Aaron's heirs, the priests: Do not make yourselves ceremoniously unclean by coming in contact with a relative who has died, unless it is a close relative – your mother, father, daughter, son, brother, or an unmarried sister – for them, you may make yourself unclean. You must not enter places where dead bodies lie – not even the body of your mother or your father – lest you become ceremonially unclean. (Leviticus 21:1-11 *TIB*)

a dead person – or even with a person lingering at death’s doorstep – you become ritually unclean: unfit to do your job, unfit to be who you are called to be. You can get ritually pure again, but the Book of Leviticus is pretty clear, if you serve in the Temple you simply don’t go near a dead body or you defile yourself. And the *only* people you even consider defiling yourself for are your next of kin. *Nobody else*. Both the priest and the Levite are in a real bind.

LAWYER:

Well, they’re in a tough spot, but not really a bind. The Law is very clear. It’s unfortunate, even tragic, for the wounded traveler, but they respond exactly as the Law says. They move to the other side and pass by in order to preserve their ability to serve God in the Temple.

JOHN:

Ah, but that *is* the bind, after all, because Jesus has exposed a bind within the religious tradition itself. In order to preserve their purity to serve God, they must choose to *not* offer compassion to the man near death. How can that be an expression of loving their neighbor? And how can it be that serving God in a building can outweigh the importance of serving God in the body of a person in need?

SUSANNA:

But this isn’t just about a bind within Judaism. I’m convinced Jesus told this parable because he saw that even his own followers might be tempted to make obedience to rules and rituals more important than people. Listen, both a Lutheran and a Catholic chaplain gave their *blessing* to the men who dropped the atomic bomb on Nagasaki. One of the landmarks given to the pilots that day was St. Mary’ Cathedral, *the center of Christianity in Japan*, and this building was the visual sighting used to drop the bomb. As one writer put it, “And what the Japanese Imperial government could not do in over 200 years of persecution, American Christians did in 9 seconds. The entire worshipping community of Nagasaki was wiped out.”* Didn’t these two chaplains, also determined to fulfill their duty, choose to “pass by on the other side,” avoiding the civilians

*The full essay by Gary Kohls, “The Bombing of Nagasaki August 9, 1945: The Untold Story,” can be found at <http://www.lewrockwell.com/orig5/kohls8.html>.

in Nagasaki who were "half-dead" the moment the plane started heading their way?

LUKE:

You're right. This is about the impulse in all of us, individually and in groups, to place our allegiances to the things we value *above* our allegiances to God's children. When you purchase toys or clothing, do you really want to think about the people in sweatshops who made them? When you buy your food, do you really want to consider the working conditions of those who harvested and processed it?

LAWYER:

And *that's* my question! Who counts as a child of God, who *is* my neighbor? To whom do I owe this allegiance? I mean, you have to draw a line someplace, don't you?

NARRATOR:

The parable continues in verses 33-35. "But a Samaritan, who was taking the same road, also came upon the traveler and, filled with compassion, approached the traveler and dressed the wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then the Samaritan put the wounded person on a donkey, went straight to an inn and there took care of the injured one. The next day the Samaritan took out two silver pieces and gave them to the innkeeper with the request, 'Look after this person, and if there is any further expense, I'll repay you on the way back.'" (Luke 10:33-35 *TIB*)

SAMARITAN:

I couldn't believe my ears. In this moment my world was turned upside down. You have to understand, *no Jew* spoke well of a Samaritan. We claimed to share the same faith as the Jews, but no one accepted us. And here, in this prophet's tale – in this Messiah's message – suddenly a Samaritan was taking center stage!

LAWYER:

I couldn't believe *my* ears. *My* world was turned upside down. If I could have retracted my question at this point, I would've reeled it back in and walked away. This is *not* the way I expected this to go. I'm angry, flustered, disoriented. Who does this guy think he is?!

LUKE:

Samaritans. This is a family feud that goes way back. And if you don't realize all the historical, theological, emotional, ethnic baggage tied up in this, you'll come away thinking we're all just supposed to go out and be "good Samaritans." But for Jesus' audience that was *unimaginable*.

JOHN:

750 years earlier, the Assyrian Empire swept through this region. They conquered the northern ten tribes of Israel and scattered them to the four winds. That's how they treated everyone. They uprooted the vanquished and dispersed them until they simply disappeared. Then they brought in peoples who had been conquered elsewhere and placed them in what had been the land of Israel; these people were settled in the hill country known as Samaria. But some of the people living in this area claimed to still be Israelites. They said they were members of the two tribes of Joseph: Ephraim and Manasseh. They claimed to be part of a handful of Israelites who had never been scattered, and who viewed themselves as faithful to the traditions of Moses.

THOMAS:

Then, 135 years after that, the Babylonian Empire conquered the Assyrians, swallowing up the remaining two tribes of Israel, known now as the Kingdom of Judah. They were carried off into exile. But twice in the book of 2 Kings we hear that as the Babylonian army moved through, they left behind "the poorest people of the land," the least of the Israelites. And for the next fifty years, while the remnant of Israel known as Judah lived in exile in Babylon, these "poorest of the poor" who had been left behind, lived up in the hill country of Samaria.

[Nebuchadnezzar, the ruler of Babylon] carried into exile all of Jerusalem — all the officers and warriors, and all the skilled workers and artisans — a total of ten thousand. Only the poorest people of the land were left behind. (2 Kings 24:14 *TIB*)

Nebuzaradan, the commander of the guard, carried the people who remained in the city into exile, along with the rest of the populace [of Judah]. But the commander left behind some of the poorest people of the land to work the vineyards and fields. (2 Kings 25:11-12 *TIB*)

LUKE:

Finally, a third superpower emerges in the region: Persia. The Persian Empire conquers Babylon, claiming all of their lands and all their captive people, just as the Babylonians had earlier done to Assyria. The Persian king, Cyrus, decides to release exiles and allow them to go home and rebuild their cities and their temples. So the Israelite captives return to Jerusalem, wearied by a generation in exile but overjoyed to be back home. When they set out to rebuild the city of Jerusalem, certain people came down from the hill country – the land known as Samaria. They say that they, too, are Israelites, and they are eager to help rebuild.

SUSANNA:

Were they from among “the poorest people of the land” left behind by the Babylonians? Or from the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh, living in the hill country since the Assyrian conquest? Or from the displaced peoples brought in by the Assyrians, who perhaps intermarried with Israelites left behind? We don’t know. We do know that they came down from Samaria, and that they regarded themselves as children of Israel. And that the Israelite refugees returning from Babylon rejected them and refused to acknowledge their kinship, either biologically or spiritually. So for at least 500 years before this parable is told, Samaritans have claimed to be Jews, and Jews have rejected those claims. By the time Jesus’ tale takes this most unexpected turn, Samaritans were *the* most despised ethnic group among Jews. They were considered worse than any of the Gentiles because they claimed a kinship that Jews regarded as false.

SAMARITAN:

I’m not a historian, a theologian, or a biologist. I only know that from my birth I was raised to honor the tradition of Moses. From my childhood I learned that in my own land I was regarded as an unclean traitor. But I can tell you this. By the time of Jesus my people *had never wavered in more than 500 years* in their claim to be true children of Israel. And for 2,000 years since Jesus, my people have continued this claim, *never wavering*. We have all but disappeared – as of 2007, only 712 Samaritans remained in the world. And yet, in your twenty-first century, scientists using genetic testing confirmed *after over 2,500 years* of being ostracized, that my people indeed shared a

common ancestor with Jews dating back to the time of the Assyrian conquest!* But at the time of this parable all that mattered was that my heritage – ever before despised among the Jews – suddenly moved from the margin to the center of the story, from outcast to honored.

Ezra 4:1-5 relates the encounter between those who came down from the hills and the exiles who had just returned from Babylon. We hear about it only from the perspective of the returning exiles, who tell the story from an angle that discredits the claims of the hill folk.
~DW

*An accessible summary of the very complicated history of the Samaritans can be found at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samaritan>.

NARRATOR:

This passage concludes in verses 36-37. “[Then Jesus asked the expert on the Law], ‘Which of these three, in your opinion, was the neighbor to the traveler who fell in with the robbers?’ The answer came, ‘The one who showed compassion.’ Jesus replied, ‘Then go and do the same.’” (Luke 10:36-37 *TIB*)

LAWYER:

I was trapped. It had been my question, and then his answer. But now it was his question, and I didn’t want to answer. I had set out to test him, and suddenly found that I was the one being tested. My anger was gone. Edged out by a wonder too deep for words. It would be days, weeks, *months*, before I could repeat the parable to others. Even in that moment I simply could not make the “S-word” come out of my mouth. I could not say *WHO* had acted as neighbor. So without actually naming him, I just mumbled, “The one who showed compassion.”

THOMAS:

I was stunned, too. I don’t think any of us had expected *this*. I like things to be clear. I like things to be concrete – touchable. But this was a little too much, even for me. *Samaritans? As neighbors?* If that was true, who could possibly be left to *not* be a neighbor? Is he really saying there are *only neighbors* in all the world?!

LUKE:

That’s exactly it. Oh, it will be a while before Jesus’ followers figure that out – by the way, have you figured it out? But at least now

the secret's out in the form of this Samaritan showing mercy to a Jew. You might remember that, unlike Matthew's Gospel, my genealogy of Jesus doesn't stop at Abraham; it goes all the way back to Adam. Jesus is here for *all* humankind. For every son of Adam and every daughter of Eve, for all the Gentiles... and even for the Samaritans.

SUSANNA:

But there's this, too. Jesus told parables to describe the reign of God. He often began with the phrase, "The Reign of God is like..." and then he'd go on to give us a word-picture of what it looked like when God was reigning as monarch. He tells this parable to answer a question about neighbors, but is it possible that he also meant for us to consider *imaging God... like a Samaritan*? Could he ask us to do that? Is it possible that God can be found in compassion coming from the least expected – even from the most despised – persons in our lives?

SAMARITAN:

I never expected that this Jewish Messiah would give *my* people an honored place in *his* tradition. I never thought that he would open up the possibility that *his* tradition could also be *our* tradition, made common to us by deeds of compassion. Have you ever known this much surprise? Can you imagine what it was like to be a "Samaritan" that day? Or what it would be like to be a Samaritan... today? *Can you?*

* * *

[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 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 21st century as we wrestle with whether or how to welcome persons who, like Samaritans, seem so other to us today, speaking as Luke, the Lawyer, Thomas, John, Susanna, the Samaritan, or 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 to 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 this passage from Luke 10 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 (Luke, the Lawyer, Thomas, John, Susanna, and the Samaritan) 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.