

HEARTS UNBOUND

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

by David R. Weiss

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BESIDES THOSE ALREADY GATHERED:
Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch

ACTS 8:26–39

National Gay and Lesbian
Task Force



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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 a scene from Acts 8 from the inside, through seven roles created to bring insight to this key passage. These roles are: (1) Luke — author of Acts, (2) Philip, (3) Ethiopian eunuch, (4) Miriam, (5) the Candace/Queen, and (6-7) two Narrators. If necessary, to accommodate groups of six or eight, the Narrators parts can be read by one person, or Luke’s role can be shared by two persons.

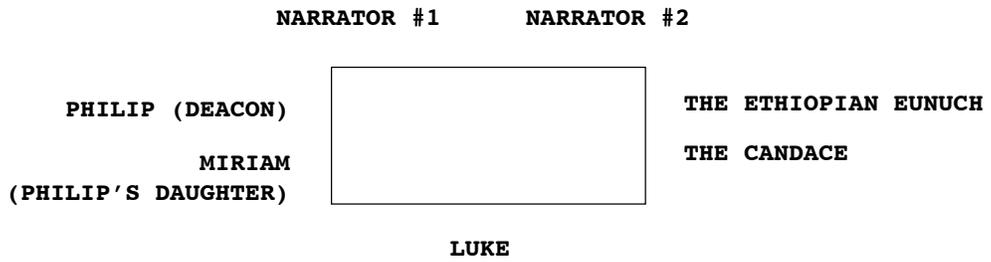
The three largest roles are Luke, Philip, and the Ethiopian eunuch. The roles of each Narrator and Miriam are a bit smaller, and the Candace has the smallest roles. None of the roles are overwhelming; no one speaks more than 10 sentences at a time and most are only 4-5 sentences long. But you may appreciate 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. I created the role of Miriam, based on the mention of four unnamed daughters of Philip in Acts 21:9, and provided a role for the Candace, in order to provide some female roles. As in all the scripts, people of any gender should feel free to take on any role. ~DW)

The Narrator will guide you through the scenes, reading from Acts 8 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 Narrators sits at one end of the group, with Philip and Miriam to one side and the Ethiopian eunuch and the Candace to the other side. Luke might sit opposite the Narrators. You might also consider making large name places to put in front of people to identify their role.*



READER'S THEATER SCRIPT**NARRATOR (1):**

Our task is to revisit Luke's story of the baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch 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.

MIRIAM:

My name is _____, and I'll be reading the part of **Miriam**, one of Philip's four daughters mentioned in Acts 21:7. (The daughters are left unnamed, so "Miriam" is the author's imagined name for this role, which helps bring a woman's voice into this conversation.)

PHILIP:

My name is _____, and I'll be reading the part of **Philip**, not the Philip who was one of the twelve disciples, but the Philip who was one of the first seven deacons appointed in Acts chapter 6.

NARRATOR (2):

My name is _____, and I'll be reading the part of the **Narrator (2)**. In this role I will read some 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 (1):

My name is _____, and I'll be reading the part of the **Narrator (1)**. In this role I will also read some of the direct biblical material, help us transition from scene to scene, and occasionally offer some extra insight into the text.

ETHIOPIAN EUNUCH:

My name is _____, and I'll be reading the part of the **Ethiopian Eunuch**, sometimes regarded as the first African convert to Christianity.

THE CANDACE:

My name is _____, and I'll be reading the part of **The Candace**, which is not a name but a title, something like "The Queen."

NARRATOR (2):

Now let's begin. This roadside encounter between Philip and an unnamed official of the Ethiopian queen took place in the very earliest years of the church. Luke records it almost immediately after the martyrdom of Stephen and before Paul's vision on the road to Damascus. So it probably happens within the first two or three years after Jesus' ministry. This is an era when all of the Apostles are still alive and active and the memory of Jesus' radical inclusion is still fresh. Yet the church is comprised almost entirely of Jewish followers of Jesus, for whom "radical inclusion" has not reached beyond the edges of their own ethnic circle.

LUKE:

The followers of Jesus didn't even regard themselves as "Christian" yet. They saw themselves as faithful Jews, for whom Jesus was a *Jewish* Messiah. So the question of where "others" fit into this Jesus Movement was both new and challenging to them. By the time I wrote both my Gospel and the Book of Acts some fifty years later a lot had happened. But as this scene unfolds, remember that all Philip has to go on is his upbringing as a Jew and his memories of Jesus.

PHILIP:

And it's likely that my memories of Jesus were mostly second-hand. I *may* have heard or seen Jesus during his lifetime, but I'm *not* the same Philip as the Apostle Philip. I'm one of the seven deacons appointed in Acts 6 to look after the resources of the early church in Jerusalem. I took on a leadership role very early in the church, and I certainly felt the guidance of the Holy Spirit, but I shouldn't be confused with the other Philip who was one of the Twelve.

NARRATOR (1):

Of course, there's always a *whole bunch* of context behind any particular passage in the Bible, but this is enough to set the scene here. The earliest followers of Jesus have stayed in Jerusalem following the experiences of Resurrection and Pentecost. There's been ongoing friction between the Jews who view Jesus as Messiah and the Jews who don't. And while the faith of these early followers of Jesus is strong, the Jews who don't see him as Messiah have both numbers and power on their side.* This friction boils over in the stoning of Stephen and prompts many of these earliest Christians to leave Jerusalem. They find safety in the outlying areas of Judea, and as they move from place to place they carry their faith with them.

In those days, as the number of disciples grew, a dispute arose between the Hellenistic Jews and those who spoke Hebrew, that the Greek-speaking widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. The Twelve assembled the community of the disciples and said, "It's not right for us to neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables. Look around among your numbers for seven people who are acknowledged to be deeply spiritual and prudent, and we will appoint them to this task. This will permit us to concentrate on prayer and the ministry of the word." The proposal was unanimously accepted by the community. They selected Stephen, full of faith and the Holy Spirit; Philip; Prochorus; Nicanor; Timon; Parmenas; and Nicholas of Antioch, who had been a convert to Judaism. They were presented to the apostles, who prayed over them and laid hands on them." (Acts 6:1-6 *TIB*)

PHILIP:

When I left Jerusalem I went to Samaria and I preached about Jesus there. This was no small thing because you may recall that there was no love lost between the Jews and the people living in Samaria. The Samaritans were despised by Jews as "pretenders to the faith," persons claiming to share our heritage, but whose claims we rejected. I grew up taking it for granted that Samaritans had no place in the family of God, but

*We should remember that this power imbalance only favored these Jews for a few decades. Soon the increasingly Gentile church went its own way. By the end of the fourth century Gentile Christians held far more power than Jews. From then on, for much of the next two millennia, Jews who lived alongside Christians, as a result of the "flipped" power imbalance, have experienced discrimination, pogroms, and the Holocaust from their "Christian" neighbors.

here I was now, preaching to them, inviting them to believe, welcoming them into God's family.

MIRIAM:

I am one of Philip's four daughters.** Of course, my father had heard the parable in which Jesus lifted up a Samaritan as the image of one's neighbor (Luke 10:25-37). And he had heard about the ten lepers whom Jesus healed – and how only the Samaritan had returned to give thanks (Luke 17:11-19). And he knew that from some perspectives the very first evangelist – the first person to carry good news about Jesus to others – was the Samaritan woman whom Jesus himself had encountered by a well (John 4:1-30). Still, lifelong attitudes don't change overnight, no matter what, and I know my father was often surprised by the turns his life took. His time in Samaria was one of those surprising turns.

**The next day we went to Caesarea. There we stayed with Philip the evangelist, one of the Seven. He had four unmarried daughters who were prophets. (Acts 21:6-7 TIB)

"Miriam" is an imagined name; the Bible does not name any of the four daughters. ~DW

NARRATOR (2):

Let's begin our passage now; we read from Acts chapter 8: "An angel of God spoke to Philip and said, 'Be ready to set out at noon along the road that goes to Gaza, the desert road.' So Philip began his journey. It happened that an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official in charge of the entire treasury of Candace, the ruler of Ethiopia, had come to Jerusalem on a pilgrimage and was returning home. He was sitting in his carriage and reading the prophet Isaiah." (Acts 8:26-28 TIB)

PHILIP:

I had been successful in Samaria by all accounts. So much so that the apostles Peter and John came to Samaria to assist in the ministry I started there. And then the Spirit sent me out to the middle of nowhere. I went. Not knowing what awaited me, but trusting that the Spirit knew where I was needed.

ETHIOPIAN EUNUCH:

And there, in the middle of nowhere, on this "desert road," he met *me*. But before we talk about that encounter, let's talk about... *me*. I'm one

of those biblical characters about whom you know some pretty intimate details, but not my name. I mean, simply by being identified as a *eunuch* you know things about me that you wouldn't dare ask about most of the people you attend church with. In two words my life has been neatly labeled, as though all you need to know about me are that I'm from Ethiopia, and I'm a eunuch.

LUKE:

Well, let's remember there was a fifty-year gap between when your story happened and when I wrote my gospel. A lot of stories circulated orally in the early church, but not every detail got preserved. And as I collected stories I never heard a tradition that gave you a name. So I passed on the story as I heard it: Ethiopian, eunuch, unnamed.

ETHIOPIAN EUNUCH:

I don't blame you, Luke. At least you preserved the story. Part of its value for generations to come – or at least for the generation that has *finally* come – is as a reminder that there have always been people excluded from the family of God because of the categories that they were put into. You didn't need to know them personally; you just needed to know the category they belonged to and that was enough to mark them "unacceptable." It still happens to people today.

THE CANDACE:

I am the queen of Ethiopia, but my own history is shrouded in mystery. It seems that I was part of several generations of women rulers in Ethiopia. And "Candace" was not my name, but my title, like "Caesar" or "Pharaoh." Although the details are not well known, it appears that I was queen, not as an honor received through my husband, but as an honor I held in my own right. A Candace was a powerful figure, sometimes a warrior or an advisor, often a mother to the king – and co-ruler alongside him. In the midst of male-centered ancient power, a Candace held her own.

LUKE:

So for this man, this eunuch, to be in charge of the queen's entire treasury means that he was powerful as well. A trusted person. An insider in Ethiopia... but an outsider for sure in Jerusalem. It says he had just been there to worship, so he followed the Jewish faith.

Whether he had been raised in or converted to Judaism, he remained Ethiopian. That meant he couldn't go beyond the outer edges of the area around the Temple, the court of the Gentiles. But *as a eunuch*, he would have been forbidden even to enter there. He could worship only from entirely outside the Temple area. No matter the strength of faith that led him on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, he was *an outsider*.

THE CANDACE:

Did he know this when he left my courts for Jerusalem? That he would be denied entrance even to the outer courts when he arrived there? I'm not sure. But it's ironic isn't it that the very feature that gave him access to my treasury is what denied him access to his God?

LUKE:

He was a *eunuch*. It was that status – as a man whose testicles had been crushed or removed or whose penis had been cut off – that kept him from gathering in any part of the worshipping assembly of Jews. The Law was clear: “No male whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is severed may enter the assembly of YHWH” (Deuteronomy 23:1 *TIB*). He was viewed as intrinsically impure; he could worship God, but nothing could make him acceptable enough to do so within the community of God's gathered people. His outsider status was written into his very being.

THE CANDACE:

And yet it was this inability to sire children that allowed him to move freely within my household. In a royal family the worst sort of “espionage” would be to mix an outsider's bloodline with the royal bloodline. Indeed, it would pose a threat to their reliability if my most trusted officials were even tempted by the way that bedroom relationships and power relationships often co-mingled. So eunuchs came with a sort of built-in “no-compete clause.” You might think it barbaric to require these persons to be eunuchs, but the price they paid with their bodies was well compensated with power, privilege, and trust. My guess is that in your day as well people are offered similar deals all the time. It's the way the world works.

ETHIOPIAN EUNUCH:

But it's a bit more complicated than that. I said earlier that just calling me a “eunuch” tells you a lot about me – but hardly

everything. Not all eunuchs were "made" eunuchs. There were men referred to as "natural" or "born" eunuchs, and they're well-attested to in the ancient world. A Sumnerian myth describes them as men who "do not satisfy the lap of women," who were created specifically to be able to resist their wives. Juvenal, a Roman playwright who lived in the first century after Jesus, wrote, "When a soft eunuch gets married... it is hard not to write a satire." Lucian, a Greek satirist, wrote a famous satire about an illiterate book-fancier, in which he adds that, of course, a blind man has no interest in a mirror, a bald man no use for a comb, and a eunuch no desire for a female lover. And Basilides, a gnostic teacher active at the same time as Juvenal, said there are men who, "from their birth have a natural sense of repulsion from a woman." Eunuchs *could* be men who were simply "wired" differently.

LUKE:

This was known in the Jewish tradition as well. The Babylonian Talmud says that "natural" eunuchs display what we might refer to as effeminate characteristics: absence of beard growth, smooth skin, and a high voice. In one of the Apocryphal books, the Wisdom of Sirach (30:18-20), a maiden is considered as attractive to a eunuch as food is to a dead person! And even Jesus refers to those who have been eunuchs since birth (Matthew 19:12).

ETHIOPIAN EUNUCH:

This passage in Acts offers no indication whether I am a "born" eunuch or a "made" one. It really doesn't matter. In either case I didn't fit into the categories required for "normal." You might say, I was... queer. And that queerness made me uniquely trustworthy in the eyes of my queen – and uniquely outcast in terms of the Temple.

PHILIP:

And so it happened that on this wilderness road – quite in the middle of nowhere – I was led by the Spirit into a quite unexpected encounter. From serving the widows in Jerusalem to preaching to the Samaritans in Samaria and now to meeting eunuchs in the wilderness, my ministry included an ever-widening circle of surprising people!

NARRATOR (1):

We continue the passage as Philip and the eunuch meet: "The Spirit

said to Philip, 'Go up and meet that carriage.' When Philip ran up, he heard the eunuch reading Isaiah the prophet and asked, 'Do you understand what you are reading?' 'How can I,' the eunuch replied, 'unless someone explains it to me?' With that, he invited Philip to get in the carriage with him. This was the passage of scripture being read: 'You are like a sheep being led to the slaughter, you are like a lamb that is mute in front of its shearers: like them you never open your mouth. You have been humiliated and have no one to defend you. Who will ever talk about your descendants, since your life on earth has been cut short?' The eunuch said to Philip, 'Tell me, if you will, about whom the prophet is talking - himself or someone else?'" (Acts 8:29-34 *TIB*)

NARRATOR (2):

Today we are surrounded by books, from hardbound gift editions to pocket-sized paperbacks to e-books that reside in a computer chip. So we might overlook the significance that the eunuch was *reading* at all. But in a time when every scroll had to be copied by hand it took either real wealth or real desire to acquire a scroll. Perhaps the eunuch had both.

THE CANDACE:

Luke doesn't say how or when he got the scroll, but I suspect he purchased it while in Jerusalem and that he was reading it for comfort and consolation on the journey home. Although he would have been denied entrance to the Temple, at least his money was accepted in the marketplace. Personally, I didn't understand his devotion to a faith that kept him an outsider. But he advised me faithfully and wisely, and so the things about him that I didn't understand, I at least respected.

PHILIP:

Luke also doesn't explain how I knew that he was a eunuch, but apparently his manner of dress or his appearance made that evident. So I knew, even as I approached the chariot, that this man had no place in my tradition - except maybe at the very edges of it. I was therefore surprised to hear the words of Isaiah on his lips. But he was reading with a hungry voice, as though speaking the words out loud could somehow unlock their secret for him. In response to the hunger I

heard in his voice I asked if he understood what he read.

ETHIOPIAN EUNUCH:

It was an unexpected grace that this man met me in the wilderness. I was reading from the 53rd chapter of Isaiah. The words were confusing, disorienting. My mind was fairly spinning when Philip stepped into the chariot.

MIRIAM:

The chapter he was reading is a section of Isaiah that you know today as the "Fourth Servant Song." It's one of four passages in which Isaiah describes the destiny and vocation of Israel – my people – as though we were a single individual, a servant of God. For generations my people read these passages and treasured them with a mix of comfort and cringing. The servant songs elevated us, inviting us to see the ebb and flow of our history, the rise... and more often the fall of our fortunes as held within the purpose of God. This passage, in particular, is wrapped in mystery, for in this song the servant is "so disfigured as to look no longer human" (Isaiah 52:14 *TIB*), portrayed as a monstrosity, leaving kings – and queens – speechless before his disfigured appearance.

PHILIP:

And while the song ends with a hint of honor – God promises to recognize the servant among those who are great – along the way it is a passage of unrelenting pain and agony.

ETHIOPIAN EUNUCH:

Still, the words spoke to me with a power I could not fathom. On the day I was castrated, I, too, had been – "like a lamb that is mute in front of its shearers." Just yesterday I had gone to the Temple in Jerusalem where I was "humiliated" and had "no one to defend" me. And despite the influence I held in the queen's court, I often felt "rejected and despised by all" (Isaiah 53:3 *TIB*); I heard people whisper about *me* behind my back that, as a eunuch, I had been "taken from the land of the living" (Isaiah 53:8 *TIB*). I did not understand it all, but I heard in the prophet's strange words something that beckoned to me. So I asked Philip whether the prophet was speaking about himself or about someone else. I knew this was important to understand.

NARRATOR (1):

So we read in verse 35: "So Philip proceeded to explain the Good News about Jesus to him." (Acts 8:35 *TIB*)

MIRIAM:

I remember, when I was a child, my father was so excited to help us see that the stories of our Jewish tradition could be used to interpret the life of Jesus. It was hard for us to understand how – if Jesus was truly God's chosen one – he could have met such a terrible end as he did on the cross. And in this passage my father showed us (and many others) that within our own tradition we have known that sometimes even those who suffer are indeed the chosen ones of God.

PHILIP:

Yes, this very passage from Isaiah was crucial for the first followers of Jesus in the earliest years of the church. We, who found his *life* so compelling – so filled with grace – well, we found his death just as confusing. How could it be that the one in whom we found *Life* had met such an ugly death? And this text from the prophet Isaiah invited us to dare to see the persisting presence of God even in Jesus' death. So when I realized what he was reading, and when he asked me about whom the prophet was speaking, *of course I told him about Jesus.*

LUKE:

And not only about Jesus' passion and death. I write that Philip proceeded to proclaim "the Good News about Jesus." I'm sure he began by connecting Jesus' suffering and death, which had happened in Jerusalem just a couple years earlier, to this ancient text from Isaiah that the eunuch was reading as he left Jerusalem himself. But he also would have told the eunuch about Jesus' *life.*

MIRIAM:

Yes, because if it hadn't been for his extraordinary life, his death wouldn't have mattered at all. And what was extraordinary about his life was not simply the growing suspicion of those around him that perhaps he was God's chosen one. But, really, what was extraordinary was that he lived as though *all of us* – from the greatest to the least, from the most honored to the most outcast – as though we were

God's chosen ones, too.

LUKE:

So let's presume that Philip's "chariot-chat" with the eunuch included the same highlights that I put in my Gospel. Mary's *Magnificat*, the song she sang while pregnant that seemed to anticipate the way the child in her womb would turn the world upside down. The announcement of Jesus' birth to shepherds – often treated like second-class citizens in those days. They were like blue-collar shift workers, or miners, or migrant laborers; not the sort of folks you'd expect to be invited to this first Christmas pageant. And the angels used the very words – "glad tidings of great joy" about the "birth of a Savior" – that were traditionally reserved to announce the birth of a new Caesar. See, my story of Jesus' life set him at odds with the powers that be from the moment of his birth and even before.

PHILIP:

But I knew that what this eunuch really needed to hear was not so much about Jesus' birth but about his ministry as an adult. I mean, *because* this man in the carriage was a eunuch, he stood and *lived* at the margins of society. Regardless of his stature within the queen's court he was never allowed to forget that he was different. Something of an outsider... *everywhere*. And having just been to the Temple to worship, he had been reminded of that with unmistakable clarity. Yet Jesus' ministry *was* at the margins. From tax collectors to lepers, from women to children, from Samaritans to the demon-possessed, from anyone deemed a "sinner" to anyone viewed as an outcast, Jesus placed the center of his activity *at the margins*.

MIRIAM:

And if God was present in Jesus, as we believe, then in Jesus we see that God's center is among those who are at the margins!

ETHIOPIAN EUNUCH:

This was the miracle that happened that day, in the middle of nowhere, on that desert road. Beginning with this text from Isaiah and ending with the tale of Jesus told by Philip, I met the God whose center met me where I was – at the edge.

NARRATOR (2):

Our passage concludes in verses 36–39: “Further along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, ‘Look, there is some water right there. Is there anything to keep me from being baptized?’ He ordered the carriage to stop; then Philip and the eunuch both went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. When they came out of the water, the Spirit of God snatched Philip away; the eunuch didn’t see him anymore, and went on his way rejoicing.” (Acts 8:36–39 *TIB*)

ETHIOPIAN EUNUCH:

When I saw the water alongside the road, I remembered how God had provided water for the Israelites to drink during their sojourn in the wilderness. And I remembered Philip’s words about Jesus being baptized by John. And how the followers of Jesus now used water baptism to ritually welcome new members into this family where there are no outsiders – where the edge *is* the center, where grace speaks the first and the final word about who we are. What else could I do but ask to be baptized? Wouldn’t you?

NARRATOR (1):

Before we get to Philip’s response, we should acknowledge a little difficulty with the text here. Depending on which Bible translation you use for your own reading, you may discover that verse 37 is missing – or put in a footnote at the bottom of the page – in some of your Bibles. And if you do an internet search for “Acts 8:37,” you’ll discover that for some folks this is a *really big deal*. Here’s what a typical footnote says (this comes from the *New Revised Standard Version*): Other ancient authorities add all or most of verse 37, [And Philip said, “If you believe with all your heart, you may.” And he replied, “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.”].

LUKE:

For some people this “missing” verse is huge because it seems to make the point that baptism *requires* a clear profession of faith in Jesus. In the sometimes heated debate between infant or adult baptism this verse – and whether it belongs in the text or as a footnote – has been the cause for many an argument.

NARRATOR (2):

Unfortunately, all the copies of Acts that we have access to today are at least a couple hundred years later than Luke's original. And the oldest of these copies *don't* include verse 37. That's why the *newest* translations, which have the advantage of being based on the *oldest* copies, *don't* include it. One way to imagine the scholars' reasoning is to ask, does it seem more likely that these words were originally present and at some later date a scribe removed them? Or that the original story didn't include these words and at some later date a scribe decided to add them in? To most scholars the second of these options seems more likely.

LUKE:

In any case, the passage seems clear with or without verse 37. The eunuch heard the story of Jesus and he responded in faith by asking to be baptized. That much is clear.

PHILIP:

It's also clear that when the eunuch ordered the carriage to stop I faced a big decision myself. He had just asked me, "Is there anything to keep me from being baptized?" And Deuteronomy 23:1 seemed pretty clear: eunuchs were *not* allowed to "enter the assembly of YHWH." But was the early church the same thing as "the assembly of the Lord"? At this point it pretty much was. We were still almost entirely a Jewish movement. We took it for granted that following Jesus was one way of *being Jewish*. We assumed that those who followed Jesus would also follow the Torah, the Jewish Teaching found in the first five books of the Bible. So how do I answer his question? It is not nearly so easy as it may seem with two thousand years of hindsight.

MIRIAM:

But just as my father believed that the Hebrew Scriptures could be used to interpret the life of Jesus, he also believed that the life of Jesus could help us interpret Scripture. And in Jesus' life my father saw a living example of Love crossing boundaries to claim beloved children of God regardless of how society or tradition labeled them.

PHILIP:

Exactly. I saw Jesus living out the very words Isaiah writes just three chapters past where the eunuch was reading: "Nor should the eunuch say, 'And I am a dried up tree.' For thus says YHWH: To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbath, who choose that which pleases me and hold fast my Covenant – to them I will create within my Temple and its walls a memorial, and a name better than that of daughters and sons. I will give them an everlasting name that will not be excised – these I will bring to my holy mountain and make them joyful in my house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be acceptable on my altar, for my house will be called a house of prayer for all peoples! Thus says the Sovereign YHWH, who gathers the diaspora [the "scattered ones"] of Israel: *There are others I will gather besides those already gathered.*" (Isaiah 56:3-5, 7-8 TIB) Emboldened by the life of Jesus and holding this text in my heart, I took the eunuch down in the water and I baptized him, welcoming him into "the assembly of God," the growing body of believers gathered around Jesus.

ETHIOPIAN EUNUCH:

You cannot imagine the feel of the water as it covered me. I felt the wetness of welcome all around me. The claim of God, *the grace of God*, covered me in the water. I, who had only ever been "chosen" to be set apart, now knew the joy of being chosen as a child of this God and a member of God's people.

LUKE:

Then, as quickly as the scene started, it ended, as Philip was "snatched away" by the Spirit. I've heard some people talk a lot about the "snatched away" part, speculating about what that meant as though it's a big deal. It's not. The eunuch barely notices. The "big deal" in this passage is that a eunuch – and an Ethiopian one at that – is welcomed without questions, without conditions, without any strings attached, into God's family. *That's a big deal.* At least it was back then. And I'm betting you can think of similar things that would be just as big a deal today.

ETHIOPIAN EUNUCH:

As for me, I went on my way rejoicing. I suppose that means that,

whether on my face or in my heart, I was smiling from ear to ear. Sometimes you don't realize the full weight of what you've been carrying until it's lifted. What difference did the baptism make? I'm no theologian; I'm only the queen's treasurer. But I can tell you this: I – who had often felt despised, rejected, and cut off – *I felt God's love wash over me*. And just as much I also felt a nearness to the human family that I had never known before. Perhaps you can explain *how* baptism brought me closer not only to God, but also to my own humanity and to those around me. I can only tell you that it was so.

MIRIAM:

I never met this eunuch. My father's encounter with him happened before I was born. But it has been one of my favorite stories to hear. Legend tells that the eunuch carried the gospel with him back to Ethiopia where he founded the first Christian church and perhaps even converted the Candace, although no one knows for sure. What I do know is that my father was changed by this encounter every bit as much as the eunuch was. It is a powerful thing to be the instrument of God's welcome. He never forgot the joy that he saw on the eunuch's face. In fact, he often told me that he imagined it was but a dim reflection of the joy on God's own face in that moment. And my father spent the rest of his days proclaiming the good news about Jesus – often to others at the edges – so that God might also go on rejoicing. I often wonder who is doing my father's work today. Do you know?

* * *

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

NARRATOR (1):

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 21st century as we wrestle with whether or how to welcome those who, like eunuchs, seem so other to us today, speaking as Luke, Philip, the Ethiopian eunuch, Miriam, the Candace, and the two Narrators, 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 (2):

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 Acts 8 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, Philip, the Ethiopian eunuch, Miriam, and the Candace) 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.