

HEARTS UNBOUND

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

by David R. Weiss

7

BLANKETED BY SURPRISE:
Peter and Cornelius

ACTS 10:1-48

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 Acts 10 from the inside, through seven roles created to bring insight to this key passage. These roles are: (1) Luke, the evangelist, (2) Peter, a disciple, (3) Cornelius, a Gentile centurion, (4) Believers — the Jewish Christians who accompany Peter, (5) the Household — Cornelius’ family and friends, and (6-7) two Narrators. In the script below the Narrator part is set up to be shared by two persons, but you can easily combine these parts into a single role or divide them three ways in order to accommodate a group size of either six or eight.

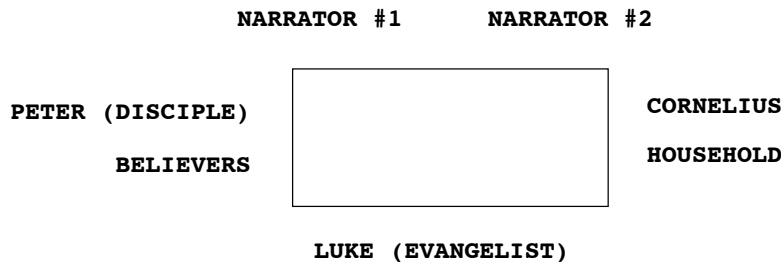
The two largest roles are Peter and Luke, followed by the two roles for Narrators (noted as #1 and #2). The roles of the Believers and Cornelius are a bit smaller yet, and the Household has the smallest role of all. None of the roles are overwhelming; no one speaks more than 10 sentences at a time and most are only 4-5 sentences long. But you may appreciate having the option of choosing a larger or smaller part overall.

(Note: like too many of the biblical narratives themselves, this script features only male characters. I deliberated whether to create/insert a female character here, but although women undoubtedly played a more significant role in the early church than is often recorded, in this passage it does seem that the main voices were likely all male. As in all the scripts, people of any gender should feel free to take on any role. ~DW)

The Narrators will guide you through the scenes, reading from Acts 10 and introducing each brief conversation. The Narrators likely haven’t seen any of this material before either, so these persons aren’t the “experts,” 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 may help keep the roles/voices clear for everyone if the Narrators sit at one end of the group, with Peter and the Believers to one side and Cornelius and the Household 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 each of the scenes in Acts 10 and 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.

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.

BELIEVERS:

My name is _____, and I'll be reading the part of the **Believers from Joppa**, a group of Jewish Christians who follow Peter on his journey to visit Cornelius.

PETER:

My name is _____, and I'll be reading the part of **Peter**, one of the original twelve disciples. Peter was often seen as a leader of the disciples (and of the early church). Along with the apostle Paul, Peter gets special credit for helping to open the church to the Gentiles.

NARRATOR (1):

My name is _____, and I'll be reading the part of the **Narrator (1)**. 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 (2):

My name is _____, and I'll be reading the part of the **Narrator (2)**. 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.

CORNELIUS:

My name is _____, and I'll be reading the part of

Cornelius, a Gentile (a non-Jew) and a person with considerable authority in the Roman army.

HOUSEHOLD:

My name is _____, and I'll be reading the part of **Cornelius' Household**, which would have included his wife and children, perhaps members of his extended family, and any of his servants or slaves.

NARRATOR (2):

Now we begin with the opening scene in Acts 10, where Cornelius is introduced and receives instructions to send for Peter. "There was a centurion named Cornelius in the Italian cohort stationed in Caesarea. The household of Cornelius was full of God-fearing people; they prayed to God constantly and gave many charitable gifts to needy Jewish people. One day at about three in the afternoon Cornelius had a vision. He distinctly saw an angel of God enter the house and call out, 'Cornelius!' Cornelius stared at the angel, completely terrified, and replied, 'I am at your service.' The angel said, 'Your prayers and offerings to the poor are pleasing to God. Send a deputation to Joppa and ask for a person named Simon who is called Peter. He is stayed with a tanner also named Simon, whose house is by the sea.' After the angel had departed, Cornelius called together three members of the household, explained everything to them and sent them off to Joppa." (Acts 10:1-8 *TIB*)

CORNELIUS:

So, I'm Cornelius. I'm not Jewish, let alone Christian, but I'm fascinated by this God that the Jews worship. Why? I suppose because in the Jewish faith, in their traditions about a God who is both merciful and just, I heard something that really intrigued me, something far more worthy of reverence than Rome's obsession with raw power. That's why I was constantly at prayer; I was trying to understand this God.

LUKE:

But there's something more going on here. See, prayer is important to me as the author of both Luke and Acts. In my Gospel I show Jesus at prayer as often as the other three Gospels put together. I want my readers to see that prayer is absolutely central to the Spirit's

activity in and around Jesus. And in the Book of Acts I show the early believers, like Peter – and here, Cornelius – at prayer all the time, too, because I want churches long after this first generation to embrace prayer as they also encounter new situations.

CORNELIUS:

And besides praying, I gave alms to the poor, so my interest in this Jewish God was more than just idle curiosity; I wanted to act on it. I was hungry for something to invest *myself* in. And if I had figured out anything already, it was that you found this God by taking care of the poor.

HOUSEHOLD:

Luke writes that the household of Cornelius was full of “God-fearing people.” That’s *us*. But really, when the head of a Roman household says, “Jump,” our question is simply, “How high?” When he says, “Worship God,” our question is simply, “Which one?” and “How?” We didn’t actually have any say in this; we’re obligated to follow Cornelius’ choice, whether it’s thoughtfully made or based on a whim. But Cornelius was a good man, so it was pretty easy to respect and follow his interest in the Jewish God.

CORNELIUS:

It also says that the angel had me “completely terrified.” Can I just say that centurions don’t scare easily? I’d prefer to say I was overwhelmed with awe – stunned, unnerved, and somehow honored beyond words that God would send an angel to me. And why? Because of my prayers and alms. Not my rank or status, but because of my spiritual hunger and my care for those at the edge of society. I don’t know who this “Peter” is, but as someone who expects to be obeyed when I speak, I know better than to question an angel’s instructions.

LUKE:

One more thing: I wrote my Gospel for Gentiles (for non-Jews). Both the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts proclaim that the Good News that came in Jesus is *not* for Jews only. That’s why, 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. In this scene, it’s actually pretty shocking that God sends an angel *to a Gentile*. 2,000

years later you take it for granted – you're *all* Gentiles! But in the early church, with its mixture of Jews and Gentiles finding their way uneasily together, I'm sure my description here set some people on edge. Angels, after all, are only supposed to come to Jews.

NARRATOR (1):

Okay, now we turn to the second scene where the actions really start to unfold with Peter's vision. We continue from verse 9: "About noon the next day, shortly before they [Cornelius' men] were to arrive in Joppa, Peter went up to the roof terrace to pray. He was hungry and asked for something to eat. While the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. Peter saw heaven standing open, and something like a large sheet being lowered to earth by its four corners. It contained all kinds of animals, birds and reptiles. A voice said, 'Stand up, Peter. Make your sacrifice, and eat.' But Peter said, 'I can't, my God. I have never eaten anything profane or unclean.' The voice spoke a second time and said, 'Don't call anything profane that God has made clean.' This happened three times, then the sheet disappeared into the heavens."

NARRATOR (2):

"Peter was still pondering the vision when Cornelius' deputation arrived. They had asked directions to Simon's house and were now standing at the door. They called out to ask if Simon, known as Peter, was there. While Peter reflected on the vision, the Spirit said, 'A deputation is here to see you. Hurry down, and don't hesitate to go with them. I sent them here.' He went down and said to the deputation, 'I'm the one you are looking for. What do you want?' They answered, 'Cornelius, a centurion – an upright and God-fearing person, respected by the Jewish people – was directed by a holy angel to send for you. We are to bring you to the household of Cornelius to hear what you have to say.' Peter invited them and gave them hospitality." (Acts 10:9-23a *TIB*)

PETER:

Did you notice? I was at prayer – and I was hungry. *That's* when I had my vision. And because I was hungry, God used a vision of *food* to open my eyes to a deeper truth. It doesn't specify which animals were on the large sheet, but they were obviously animals found on the list

of foods forbidden to Jews in Leviticus 11. Things like rabbit, pig, lobster, turtle, eagle, vulture, owl. It's a *long* list. And there's no ambiguity here. They're called "detestable," and we Jews become unclean — we "defile" ourselves — if we eat them or even touch the carcass. Being unclean limits what we can do to fulfill our other obligations as Jews, so it's a *big* deal. *Good Jews never willingly defile themselves.*

LUKE:

Did you notice, too, that God tells Peter *three* times to eat. Remember that earlier in my Gospel, while Jesus was on trial, I reported Peter denying Jesus *three times* (Luke 22:54–62). So this three-part vision adds a little symmetry to that. But there's also just something about Peter — there's no doubt that he was *the* leader among the twelve disciples. All of the Gospels agree on that. But despite his leadership, he also has a knack for... shall we say, being a little dense. Is it possible that we actually *like* our leaders a little dense? I don't know. Maybe it was just the temperament of Peter, regarded by some as our first bishop, by others even as our first Pope. Whatever the case, even after the third time, Peter remained greatly puzzled.

Leviticus 11 offers detailed dietary directions for the early Hebrews. Animals were considered clean or unclean according to whether they "fit" into the order of the world as the Hebrew people regarded it. Both rabbits and pigs were "detestable" because their hooves and stomachs (whether they "chewed their cud") didn't match up in the "right" way. Turtle and lobsters were "detestable" because they lived in water, but weren't fish. Eagles and owls were "detestable" because, unlike other birds that ate seeds or fruit, these birds ate other animals. Vultures were "detestable" because they ate carrion.

Eating unclean animals — or even touching them — could "defile" a Jew. It isn't accurate to say that eating unclean animals was a "sin" in a moral sense; no one was harmed by such a deed. But diet was regarded as a fundamental way to honor the cosmic order as the Hebrew people understood it, and to eat foods that were "out of order" put a person off balance or out of sync. It rendered them ritually unclean, meaning that they could not fulfill other obligations of the Torah until they put themselves back into balance.

A full exploration of Jewish dietary law (and its place within the Torah as a whole) is well beyond the scope of this Reader's Theater. The point to be made is that Peter's vision was a direct challenge to one facet of the Jewish-Christian worldview (clean/unclean food) for the purpose of challenging a second facet of the Jewish-Christian worldview (clean/unclean people). We need to recognize that depth of the dilemma that the blanket of food posed to Peter in order to recognize the power of the vision to reshape Peter's view about where Gentiles might fit within the early church. ~DW

PETER:

Yeah, I was pretty confused. Was God changing the rules now? Or were these foods always clean – and were we mistaken? I was feeling puzzled, surprised, annoyed, confused all at once. And then the Spirit told me these men were here to see me. And they're sent by a *Gentile* – an unclean person, someone I'm not supposed to have anything to do with. Well, the pieces *started* to fall into place, but it was a long restless night for me. I had a *lot* to sort through. Although Luke doesn't say so, you can bet I spent a good bit of the night in prayer.

LUKE:

Peter's right. I don't mean to be unfair to him. Think about it: these people had no Sunday School or Church School or Vacation Bible School. They had nothing telling them the story of the early church. No catechism with crisp clear answers to memorize. No Book of Order or Book of Discipline. No clear creed or confession. They didn't even have the New Testament yet! There was *no map* to guide them as they moved into uncharted terrain. Maybe there are issues that leave you at a loss today – and I'm guessing there are – if so, then you can empathize with Peter.

NARRATOR (1):

Now we move to the third scene, Peter's journey from Joppa and his arrival at Caesarea. We pick up the passage in verse 23: "Peter left the next day, accompanied by some of the co-workers from Joppa. They reached Caesarea the day after. Cornelius was waiting for them, along with his household and many close friends. As Peter entered the house, Cornelius met him, dropped to his knees and bowed low. As he helped Cornelius to his feet, Peter said, 'Get up! I'm a human being just like you!' While they were talking with Cornelius, Peter went in and found many people gathered there. He said to them, 'You know it's unlawful for a Jew to associate with Gentiles or visit them. But God made it clear to me not to call anyone unclean or impure. That's why I made no objection when I was summoned. Why have you sent for me?'"

NARRATOR (2):

"Cornelius answered, 'Four days ago, I was here praying at this hour – three in the afternoon. Suddenly a figure in shining robes stood

before me and said, "Cornelius, your prayers have been heard and your charity has been accepted as a sacrifice before God." Send to Joppa and invite Simon, known as Peter, who is staying in the house of Simon the tanner, who lives by the sea." I sent for you immediately, and you were kind enough to come. Now we are all gathered here before you to hear the message God has given you for us.'" (Acts 10:23b-33 *TIB*)

LUKE:

I should also tell you, I'm a geography buff. I like to describe things unfolding across *places*. In my Gospel, I chart the movement of the Good News about Jesus as it travels from his birth in Bethlehem to his death in Jerusalem. In Acts, I follow the movement of the church, from Jerusalem to Rome. A lot happens "on the road." In my Gospel I write, "Jesus firmly resolve to proceed toward Jerusalem." (Luke 9:51 *TIB*) Then I spend the next *ten* chapters explaining Jesus' ministry through things he said and did on the way to Jerusalem. That's how I see Christianity: *you only understand it when you're in motion, on the way*. Here in Acts, I only offer a single verse (Acts 10:23) to report that Peter and a group of Jewish Christians living in Joppa go with Cornelius' men to Caesarea. But I can assure you there was a *lot* going on inside their heads while they walked!

PETER:

You can say that, again! This journey defines the rest of my life. Along the way I thought about the vision of forbidden foods again and again. And I remembered all the Scripture texts – and there are a *lot* of them – that called Gentiles unclean. These people were off limits. Condemned. Cursed. The only way they were acceptable to God was if they entirely changed their lifestyle. They had to re-arrange their kitchens, clear out their closets, change their diets, even get themselves circumcised. In short, they had to *stop being Gentiles and become Jews*. But the vision of foods seemed to call all of that into question.

BELIEVERS:

We're the believers from Joppa. We went along because Peter was our leader – and not just the leader here in Joppa, but for the entire early church. And we knew he was taking a mighty big risk by traveling to the house of a Gentile. I think we sensed that this might be one of

those moments we'd tell our grandchildren about – a history-in-the-making moment – and we were going to be there.

PETER:

I was glad for their company – mostly. Unless you've been a leader yourself, it's easy to overlook how heavy leadership can sit on your shoulders at times. It was easy to be full of bluster when Jesus was right there with us – and I was often full of bluster. But now he was with us in a different way; no less present, but not nearly so easy to hear. So I was glad for the company. Still...

BELIEVERS:

Peter's right. Our company was a mixed blessing. Some of us were genuinely curious about what might happen. We'd heard tales about Jesus' crossing boundaries to include those who were outcast among our own people. Some of us had been at Jerusalem on Pentecost. We'd experienced the rushing wind and the fiery tongues and the many languages. We knew God had new things yet to do. But, truth be told, others of us were more skeptical. Some went along just to be there if Peter did anything out of line. Leaders get equal measures of honor and envy. There were more than a few wary eyes among us. And whatever our reasons, it's fair to say we were all a bit on edge.

PETER:

I knew the believers who'd come with me were a mixed lot; watching my every step, hanging on my every word. I heard the collective gasp when I stepped across the threshold into Cornelius' house. So I chose my words very carefully, as much for these fellow believers as for Cornelius. I let everyone know that – yes – we were breaking the Law of Moses – *the Law of God as we understood it* – by being in his house. Nobody but me knew about my vision yet, but I declared that God had shown me that *no person* was unclean. I knew I was on thin ice; I just hoped I had more faith than the last time I'd tried walking on water!

CORNELIUS:

You have to excuse me; I'm a Gentile. I didn't know what I'd gotten myself into. Sure I'd prayed a few prayers – well, a lot of prayers. And I'd given a few alms – well, a lot of alms, too. But when Peter arrived, all I knew was that this is the person the angel told me to

send for. So, being a good Roman, I did the only thing I knew how to do in that moment, *I knelt down and submitted to him*. Of course, Peter wanted *nothing* to do with that. So much for making a good first impression...

PETER:

He's right. I thought he was worshipping me, and I wouldn't stand for that. But I was also surprised, maybe a bit uneasy, that he'd gathered his *whole household*. I mean, I was nervous enough about meeting with *one* Gentile and here were a couple dozen of them! What had I gotten *myself* into?

HOUSEHOLD:

What Peter didn't know is that most of us weren't there exactly by choice. You remember the whole "Jump." – "How high?" thing. This was our, "Be there." – "How long?" moment. Peter's visit was at Cornelius' request, not ours, but it was clearly important to him. And, within a Roman household, that made it important to us, too. So we were all there with a sense of expectancy, but none of us really knew *what* to expect.

BELIEVERS:

And then Peter crossed the threshold! We couldn't believe it! First, he leads us into the wrong part of town; then he leads us into the wrong house in the wrong part of town. And we followed him. But I remember thinking, "How far? How far will *I* follow him?" I mean, he's our leader, to be sure... but *these people* – they're *not* God's children. *Not*. Period. I can tell you, every one of us was worried that we were betraying our faith.

CORNELIUS:

Well, I told Peter why I'd sent for him – as much as I understood. My heart was racing, though. I'd been drawn to this God, sensing there was "something more" here. And now that "something more" was at my doorstep – *inside my house*. Not Peter himself, but the message he brought. I didn't know yet what Peter would say, but I knew my life depended on it.

PETER:

I had never felt the weight of my leadership so heavily. To use the biblical images, in this moment I was both priest and prophet at the same time. I was responsible as priest for preserving the sanctity of God's people. And I was responsible as prophet for declaring the freedom of God. And in this moment the freedom of God seemed to be ready to remake the sanctity of the people in ways no one ever imagined.

LUKE:

I just love this scene. I know she comes along some 1900 years after me, but this scene reminds me of Flannery O'Connor, the great short story writer who helped interpret the American South to the rest of the country. Someone* once described her as writing stories in which all the pieces got laid out and then turned loose to collide with each other. And when asked why she wrote in such extremes, she replied to the effect, 'when you're trying to communicate with those who are hard of hearing, you need to shout.' Look, I've got all the pieces in place: Peter, the Believers, Cornelius, and his Household. And we're about to have an extraordinary collision – *with Grace*. When we get to the fifth scene, watch for the collision and listen to me shout.

*Thomas Merton, "Flannery O'Connor – A Prose Elegy," in *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, ed. Brother Patrick Hart (New York: New Directions Books, 1981), 159-161. The quote about her use of extreme images is widely reported, though without specific citation.

NARRATOR (1):

But first, we turn to the fourth scene, where Peter preaches. "So Peter said to them, 'I begin to see how true it is that God shows no partiality – rather that any person of any nationality who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to God. This is the message God sent to the people of Israel, the Good News of peace proclaimed through Jesus Christ, who is Savior of all. You yourselves know what took place throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee with the baptism John proclaimed. You know how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power, and how Jesus went about doing good works and healing all who were in the grip of the Devil, because God was

with him. We are eyewitnesses to all that Jesus did in the countryside and in Jerusalem.'"

NARRATOR (2):

"'Finally, Jesus was killed and hung on a tree, only to be raised by God on the third day. God allowed him to be seen, not by everyone, but only by the witnesses who had been chosen beforehand by God – that is, by us, who ate and drank with Christ after the resurrection from the dead. And Christ commissioned us to preach to the people and to bear witness that this is the one set apart by God as judge of the living and the dead. To Christ Jesus all the prophets testify, that everyone who believes has forgiveness of sins through this Name.'" (Acts 10:34-43 *TIB*)

PETER:

Now give me a little credit. If you just listened to these 10 verses, you heard a one-minute sermon. It took *two days* for Cornelius' servants to reach me in Joppa. It took us another *two days* to journey back to Caesarea. So after all that traveling, you can be sure I talked for *more* than one minute. But even in these few verses you get a sense of what I said: that God shows *no partiality* – *everyone is welcome in the Kingdom*. That in Jesus we see God – and God's desire to liberate and heal – with unique clarity. That although Jesus' message and ministry got him killed, God *affirmed* his message and ministry by raising him up. And that now, by aligning our lives with his life we can live with unimaginable hope and meaning.

LUKE:

Peter's right. He went on for quite a while. Believe me – *quite a while*. But remember, this is a *sequel* to my Gospel. I expect that my readers will either have already heard my first book, or if they haven't, they'll want to now, so I'm not going to repeat it all here. It's safe to say that over the next *hour or two*, Peter pretty much summed up the parables, healings and other deeds of Jesus that I relate in my Gospel. He talked about how Jesus prayed, how he was concerned for the poor and outcasts, how he pushed the boundaries by including women. It was a lot more than a one-minute message!

BELIEVERS :

And we listened hard for anything that would explain why we were here doing this. "God shows no partiality?" Do you have a *text* for that, Peter? Because in our Scriptures God shows a *lot* of partiality. Sure, everything else Peter said was pretty much what we'd been hearing all along – even about Jesus challenging boundaries. But it was always a story of good news *for us* – the Jews. And now Peter is saying this story includes *others* – Gentiles – and just the way they are? I have to tell you, none of us could see exactly how Peter was able to set aside text after text after text and just say, "God shows no partiality." We weren't convinced.

CORNELIUS :

All I can say is that, as I listened, I felt Peter's words bring something to life inside me that was waiting to be born – that I never expected. Up until now my faith had been all hunger; now it became *hope*. Everything he said was new to me. I couldn't sort it all out right then, but I heard more in his words that afternoon than I had heard in my entire lifetime. And I knew that I wanted to spend the rest of my life unfolding that hope in me.

HOUSEHOLD :

Here we are again. "Jump." – "How high?" "Be there." – "How long?" "Believe."... "How? How exactly do you do that?" Maybe a few of us

Look, I am doing something new!
(Isaiah 43:19 *TIB*)

But Jonah grew indignant and fell into a rage. He prayed to YHWH and said, "Please YHWH! Isn't this exactly what I said would happen, when I was still in my own country? That's why I left and fled to Tarshish: I knew that you were a God of tenderness and compassion, slow to anger, rich in kindness, relenting from violence."
(Jonah 4:1-2 *TIB*)

So Ruth and Boaz were married. And from their union YHWH enabled Ruth [the Moabite] to conceive and she gave birth to a child.... And Naomi's neighbors named the child, saying, "A son has been born to Naomi; we will call him Obed." And Obed begot Jesse – and Jesse begot David. (Ruth 4:13,17 *TIB*)

For thus says YHWH: "The foreigners who join themselves to me, ministering to me, loving the name of YHWH, and worshipping me – all who observe the Sabbath and do not profane it, and cling to my Covenant – 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, 6-8 *TIB*)

After that, I will pour my Spirit on all humankind.
(Joel 3:1 *TIB*)

felt something coming to life inside us, but mostly we were several steps behind Cornelius. We didn't have his status; we weren't used to thinking that our lives were *ours* to direct. But we were *fascinated*. And we were aware that the Believers from Joppa were watching us with a mix of apprehension and distaste. To them I think we still looked like a bunch of nicely dressed – but still quite biblically unclean – lobsters that they were being asked to eat. We couldn't see how this was going to have a good ending.

NARRATOR (1):

Now we come to the fifth scene in which God's welcome is revealed. We begin with verse 44: "Peter had not finished speaking these words when the Holy Spirit descended upon all who were listening to the message. The Jewish believers who had accompanied Peter were surprised that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also, whom they could hear speaking in tongues and glorifying God." (Acts 10:44-46 *TIB*)

LUKE:

So this is *the* moment. These three verses are the whole audacious message of Acts summed up. I'm telling you, Flannery O'Connor would be smiling...

PETER:

I had just been preaching about "all the prophets" and *here they were*, coming to life. Isaiah's declaration that God would be doing a new thing. Jonah's reluctant insistence that God's love embraces absolutely everyone – even those we despise. Ruth's remembrance that hidden within King David's own lineage is Gentile blood. Isaiah's daring claim that not only foreigners but even eunuchs were welcome among the people of God – and his *promise that there were others that God still intended to welcome*. And finally Joel's promise of a day when God's Spirit would be poured out *on all flesh*. Here it was. *All these words, come to life before my eyes*.

CORNELIUS:

I didn't know the writings of any of those prophets that Peter just recounted. So maybe it's appropriate that when he says "all these words" had come to life, *my* experience was simply beyond words.

I wanted to speak hope and joy and gratitude... and I found myself speaking pure music, making sounds that matched no human vocabulary but which gave voice exactly to what I felt.

BELIEVERS:

We couldn't believe it. But we couldn't deny it either. It was Pentecost again, but this went even further. At Pentecost it was *Jews* who spoke all languages so that all might hear the good news. Here it was *Gentiles* being filled with the Spirit and speaking the holy language. We remembered Isaiah's protest at his calling that he had unclean lips – yet these people *WERE* unclean. Period. Head to toe. And everything in between. But they were somehow no longer unclean, because in this instant God chose them. Or perhaps in this instant *God revealed to us that they, too, had always been chosen, and only our eyes had failed to see that.*

HOUSEHOLD:

Finally – suddenly – we caught up to Cornelius. We, too, were wordless, but filled with speech. We weren't babbling, though to human ears it might have sounded like that. We spoke pure joy. Our voices made music beyond words. And this was the joy we made: that all of us, both Jew and Gentile, both powerful and slave, both men and women, *in this moment we were one people loved by God and while our differences did not disappear, they no longer divided us.*

LUKE:

Really you can't do more than this. This is like the Fourth Movement of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony: his "Ode to Joy." Or the climax of Tchaikovsky's 1812 Overture with cannons firing and fireworks crisscrossing in the sky. It's like the rising crescendo of King's "I have a dream" speech. Or the impassioned title scene from Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. There's a lot of the Book of Acts yet to come, but really it peaks here. The gospel – the good news in Jesus Christ – takes an unexpected turn, outward... backward... and forward to every "Adam" – and to every "Eve," indeed to every human being ever born – and says, "Welcome home."

NARRATOR (2):

We've reached the final scene, the church's response to God's welcome.

Listen to it in Acts 10:47-48. "Then Peter asked, 'What can stop these people who have received the Holy Spirit, even as we have, from being baptized with water?' So he gave orders that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. After this was done, they asked him to stay on with them for a few days." (Acts 10:47-48 *TIB*)

PETER:

For a moment, between verse 46 and verse 47, between the speaking in tongues and my first words spoken to the Believers, I was suddenly back at the campfire, outside the high priest's house, while Jesus was on trial (Luke 22:54-62). Three times people asked me if I was a friend of Jesus. Three times I denied knowing the man to whom I had pledged my deepest loyalty. Three times I hid from being linked to the boundary-breaking gospel-proclaiming activity that had put his life at risk. *NOT TODAY.*

LUKE:

I'm exhausted just remembering it all. Imagine what it was like for Peter and the Believers from Joppa. Everything *must* have seemed backward for a moment –

PETER:

Exactly! We're supposed to baptize with water *first*, and then the Spirit comes. But the moment I say that, *THAT* sounds completely backward. It isn't "our" church, with the Spirit following us. It's *God's* church, and our task is to watch and listen for the Spirit, and to follow where the Spirit's freedom leads us. Anyway, I asked the question here, because I wanted, one last time, to give any of the Believers who'd come with me a chance to say, "Wait! Stop!" You see, we would *never* have thought of baptizing a Gentile unless they first became Jewish. They had to surrender their otherness and become like us before we baptized them. But here we had experienced the Spirit's undeniable presence in their midst – *and in the midst of their otherness*. If the Spirit could claim them *exactly as they were*, who were we to think our rules and rituals could do otherwise?

BELIEVERS:

I won't lie. Even in the midst of the ecstasy – I mean, we were speaking in tongues, too – we could not see our way through this. This

changes *everything*. Or... maybe what it does is make everything we've heard about Jesus all too real. I think all we knew at this moment was that this Good News was almost more *Good* than we wanted it to be. And we remembered Jesus' words about New Wine, and figured we'd just seen *our* wineskins burst wide open.

* * *

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

NARRATOR (2):

Now I invite you one last time, within your 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 Cornelius and his household, seem so other to us, speaking as Luke, Peter, Cornelius, the Believers from Joppa, the Household of Cornelius, 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 (1):

Our last task is to step back into our own voices and identify some of the insights we gained. So thinking about either the Acts 10 passage or the challenge faced by the church to widen our welcome today — or both...

What insights did you gain from this experience?

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 scene (Peter, Cornelius, the Believers from Joppa, and the Household of Cornelius) where do you see their views or experience reflected in the current church — or in your own life?
4. What difference would it makes 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.