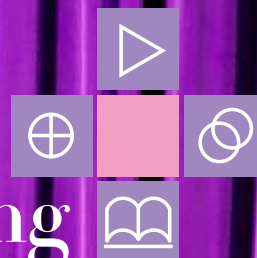


HEARTS UNBOUND

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

by David R. Weiss

INSTITUTE FOR
**Welcoming
Resources**



National Gay and Lesbian Task Force

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1

HIDDEN IN THE KING'S BLOOD:
A Faithful Outsider Brought In

THE BOOK OF RUTH

National Gay and Lesbian
Task Force



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by David R. Weiss

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

Affirm United/S'affirmer Ensemble
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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 the story of Ruth from the inside, through seven roles created to bring insight to this key biblical tale. These roles are: (1) Naomi, (2) Ruth, (3) Boaz, (4) Townspeople — assorted voices in the background, (5) 3rd Isaiah — a prophetic voice contemporary to the book of Ruth, (6) Author — the unknown author of Ruth, and (7) Narrator. If necessary, to accommodate groups of six or eight, Third Isaiah and Townspeople can be read by one person, or the Narrator role can be shared by two persons.

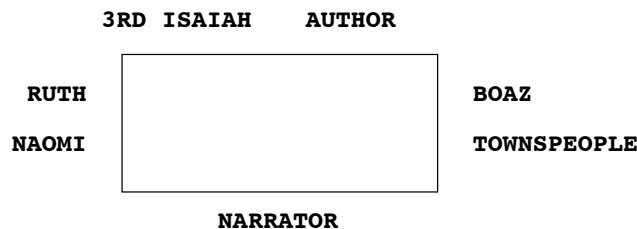
The two largest roles are the Narrator and the Author, followed by the roles for Ruth, Naomi, Boaz, and 3rd Isaiah. The Townspeople is the smallest role of all. None of the roles are overwhelming; no one speaks more than 10 sentences at a time and most are only 4-5 sentences long. But you may appreciate having the option of choosing a larger or smaller part overall.

The Narrator will guide you through the story of Ruth, summarizing the plot line and helping transition from one scene to the next. 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 make marks in your booklets 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 the story of Ruth.

Note: The Book of Ruth presents some complexity in how the events described in the tale, the overall message of the story, and the historical context of its writing, relate to each other. It's too important a tale to set aside just because of this complexity — but impossible to understand without addressing these things. The characters explain this in the Theater itself, but there is also a chart at the end of the script that allows participants to see this complexity laid out on a timeline. The chart might be distributed and referred to as necessary.

Suggestion: It may help keep the roles/voices clear for everyone if the Narrator sits at one end of the group, with Ruth and Naomi to one side and Boaz and the Townspeople to the other side. 3rd Isaiah and the Author might sit opposite the Narrator. You might also consider making large name places to put in front of people to identify their role.



Note: While the book of Ruth is only four chapters long, it's too long to incorporate in its entirety into this Reader's Theater, so the characters summarize the action and lift up the key points. Everyone will be able to follow things, even if they haven't read the whole book, but it would be helpful to encourage participants to read the entire book of Ruth beforehand. (By generous permission of the publisher, the Book of Ruth appears in its entirety as an appendix to this Reader's Theater.)

READER'S THEATER SCRIPT**NARRATOR:**

Our task is to revisit each of the scenes in the Book of Ruth 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.

NAOMI:

My name is _____, and I'll be reading the part of **Naomi**, a Hebrew (Jewish) woman, now widowed and the mother-in-law of Ruth.

RUTH:

My name is _____, and I'll be reading the part of **Ruth**, a Moabite (that is, a Gentile, a non-Jewish) woman, now widowed and the daughter-in-law of Naomi.

3rd ISAIAH:

My name is _____, and I'll be reading the part of **Third Isaiah**, the author of the final chapters (56-66) of the Book of Isaiah. Although not a participant in the scene here, his words belong in this conversation, so his voice has been introduced into this Reader's Theater.

AUTHOR:

My name is _____, and I'll be reading the part of the **Author**, the unknown writer who created the Book of Ruth. In this role I will offer "behind the scenes" comments to help you understand the story from the author's perspective.

BOAZ:

My name is _____, and I'll be reading the part of **Boaz**, an upright Hebrew (Jewish) man and a close relative of Naomi's deceased husband.

TOWNSPEOPLE-FIELDWORKERS:

My name is _____, and I'll be reading the part of the Hebrew (Jewish) **Townspeople-Fieldworkers** of Bethlehem, the city to which Naomi returns with Ruth.

NARRATOR:

My name is _____, and I'll be reading the part of the **Narrator**. In this role I will summarize the plot from the Book of Ruth. I'll also help us transition from scene to scene, and I'll occasionally offer some extra insight into the text.

NARRATOR:

Okay, we'll begin with a few background comments on the Book of Ruth. Then we'll turn to the story itself.

AUTHOR:

I would introduce myself, but since I'm "unknown" that's a little difficult. You see, like most of the books of the Bible, the Book of Ruth does not identify its author. There's not even a tradition or legend about who I might be. So I'm about as "unknown" as they come. Even the date for my writing is unknown. Some scholars believe I wrote within a couple generations of the story I tell – maybe around the time of King David (1000 BCE). But most of them place me hundreds of years later. That's because my message fits most clearly in the time after the Exile, 500-600 years *after* King David (500-400 BCE). During these years the people of Israel wrestled with the place of foreigners in the community of God's people.

NARRATOR:

Let me explain how we're dating things. "BCE" means "Before the Common Era;" it's the same timeline as "BC," which means "Before Christ," but the designation BCE is used by scholars today to recognize that not everyone regards Jesus *as Christ*. Still, Jesus' birth *is* what marks the beginning of the "Common Era," so when you hear BCE it simply means the number of years *before the Common Era* began, which is also the number of years before the birth of Jesus.

3rd ISAIAH:

Okay, to make matters even more complicated, I'm also an "unknown" author. I'm the voice behind the final chapters of the Book of Isaiah. Virtually all scholars acknowledge that most of the first 39 chapters of Isaiah have roots in the actual prophet Isaiah, who was active from 740-687 BCE. That's right *before* and right *after* Israel's Northern

Kingdom fell to the Assyrian Empire. But the material in chapters 40-55 comes from a different voice and reflects a different time. This material is often referred to as "Second Isaiah." It comes from an un-named prophet active around the time that the Babylonian Exile was ending, some 150 years later than the original Isaiah. And many scholars hear yet another voice in chapters 56-66, a *third* prophet who sees himself continuing the legacy of Isaiah, but who is now speaking to Israel's reality *after* they've returned from the Exile, perhaps just a generation or two after Second Isaiah. *That third voice is me.*

[Participants might pause and locate Third Isaiah on the Timeline – page 24 – and keep the Chart close by as the next four speakers fill out the history and context for the story.]

AUTHOR:

I know this can all seem kind of complicated and a bit hard to follow. After all, this isn't your history, it's *ours*. But bear with us, because the history sets the context for understanding my story about Ruth. While this tale describes events that happened 500 years *before* the Exile, when heard against the backdrop of Israel's life *after* the Exile, it reveals an astonishing message about God.

3rd ISAIAH:

So before we turn to the tale, keep this in mind. In 722 BCE the Northern Kingdom, comprising almost all of Israel, was conquered by the Assyrian Empire and scattered to the four winds. After 722 BCE these ten tribes were effectively lost to history; they're sometimes referred to as "the lost tribes of Israel." About 130 years later, between 597 and 587 BCE, another regional superpower, Babylon, conquered Assyria and swallowed up the last remnant of Israel, then known as the Kingdom of Judah. These last Israelites – members of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin – were deported to Babylon, where they lived in exile for about fifty years.

AUTHOR:

Around 539 BCE, a third regional superpower arose, the Persian Empire led by Cyrus, and they conquered the Babylonians. Cyrus decided to let the Israelites, who had been living in exile in Babylon, return to their homeland. Many of them did. And over the next hundred years

one of the driving theological questions for the people of Israel became, "What went wrong... why did the Exile happen?" One of the reasons most often given was that Israel had been "too friendly" with her neighbors, and the resulting intermarriages had led to their being attracted to foreign gods.

3rd ISAIAH:

One response was an emphasis on ethnic purity. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah convey this response. First a priest (Ezra) and then a governor (Nehemiah) declared that God was opposed to all intermarriage. But this wasn't the only view. There were other biblical voices – like mine, and the authors of both Ruth and Jonah – who understood God in ways that ran counter to Ezra and Nehemiah. So the story of Ruth offered itself to the imagination of Israel in the midst of this debate about how to treat foreigners – and about how God regards foreigners. Most scholars consider the story of Ruth to be *historical fiction* or *purposeful folklore*. But that doesn't mean it was any less "inspired" than other imaginative tales like, say, Jesus' parables. Just like the parables, the truth of Ruth doesn't rest on the history it tells but on the theology it offers.

AUTHOR:

Enough already! If I've done my work well, the story will stand on its own. You know the context now, so let's turn to the tale itself. I begin by putting the two main characters in place – or, more accurately, by putting them clearly *out-of-place*. Naomi is a Hebrew widow. Ruth is her daughter-in-law. Years earlier, during a famine, Naomi journeyed with her husband from the land of Israel to the land of Moab, only to have him die there, leaving her alone with two boys. The boys grew up and both of them married Moabite women. But soon both of Naomi's sons die as well, and she is left only with two foreign daughters-in-law, in a foreign land. Now, to be a widow in your own land in the ancient world was bad enough; to be a widow in a foreign land, tied only to other widowed women – and foreign women, at that – Naomi was truly to be *out of place*.

NARRATOR:

The rest of chapter one can be summed up like this: Naomi learns that there was food again in Israel, so she decides to return to her people.

Although her two daughters-in-law initially set out with her, Naomi does not wish them to now be out of place in her land. So she urges them to stay in Moab and expresses her hope that each of them may find security by finding a new husband among their own people. After a bit of protesting, one of her daughters-in-law agrees to stay in Moab, but the other one, Ruth, is almost defiant in her loyalty to Naomi. And ultimately Naomi allows Ruth to return with her to Bethlehem.

AUTHOR:

Wait! You can't sum it up and leave out the best parts. Think about this: in an almost exclusively patriarchal society I dared to write a short story ... featuring *women*. I dared to think that their feelings and their words might be ... *memorable*. In fact, at least a few scholars wonder whether *I* might have been a woman storyteller myself to craft such lines for women. This is what Ruth said when Naomi encouraged her to go back to Moab:

RUTH:

"Please don't ask me to leave you and turn away from your company. I swear to you: Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people will be my people, and your God, my God. Where you die, I'll die there too and I will be buried there beside you. I swear – may YHWH be my witness and judge – that not even death will keep us apart." (Ruth 1:16-17, *"The Inclusive Bible - TIB"*)

AUTHOR:

No wonder Naomi relented and welcomed Ruth's company. These words have been echoed as expressions of fierce friendship – even borrowed for use in weddings – for thousands of years since I penned them!

3rd ISAIAH:

But remember this, too, that Ruth, who makes this stunning pledge of loyalty, is a *Moabite*. Her people are *cursed* in the Book of Deuteronomy, where it says that no Moabite shall be allowed to join the "assembly of the Lord" not even after ten generations – which is a fancy way of saying "not ever!" And after the Exile both Ezra and Nehemiah insist on breaking up all intermarriages between Hebrew men and Moabite women. Ruth carries some pretty significant ethnic baggage with her, but here her loyalty to a Hebrew widow is given an eloquence

that makes it a fitting metaphor even for God's loyalty to us.

NAOMI :

I was blessed by Ruth's companionship. I knew that she would be an outsider among my people, but, as a widow myself, I would also be an outsider even in my own land. Who can explain the depth of Ruth's loyalty to me? But who can question such loyalty either? Hers was a gift of grace to me. In a world where widowed women had nothing, *we chose to have each other.*

NARRATOR :

So the two women arrive in Bethlehem, where the relatives of Naomi's dead husband lived. The townspeople are "abuzz with gossip" at their arrival. Naomi has been gone for more than a decade — and she had left with a husband and two sons. Now here she is: a widow without children, in the company of a foreign woman. Her fortunes have changed, to say the least. They arrive in town just as the barley harvest is being gathered. And Ruth, showing compassion for her mother-in-law, offers to go into the fields to glean barley for them to eat. By chance — or by Providence — she gleans in the fields of Boaz, a kinsman of Naomi's husband.

AUTHOR :

Hold on! Does everyone know what "gleaning" means? See, the people of Israel recognized that God wanted mercy shown to the poor, to those at the margins of society. Thus, Israelite law required those harvesting the fields to leave a portion of the harvest *in* the field, so that

No Ammonite or Moabite, even down to the tenth generation, may enter the assembly of YHWH, for they did not come to meet you with food and water on your journey out of Egypt. You are not to seek their welfare nor their goodwill as long as you live. (Deuteronomy 23:3-4, 6 *TIB*)

Shecaniah ben-Jehiel, of the family of Elam, told Ezra, "We have been unfaithful to God by marrying the foreign people of the land. But there is yet hope for Israel. Let us now make a covenant with YHWH to disown our foreign spouses and children." And they dismissed them and their children. (Ezra 10:2-3, 44 *TIB*)

It was in those days that I [Nehemiah] saw Judeans marrying Gentiles from Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab. Half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod or some other tongue, and not the language of Judah. I scolded them and cursed them; I beat some of them and pulled out their hair, and made them take an oath in God's name, saying to them, "You shall not give your children in marriage to their children. Nor will you take their children in marriage for your children, nor for yourselves." (Nehemiah 13:23-25 *TIB*)

the poor could follow behind and “glean” – that is, “gather” – this leftover grain for themselves. In this scene, Ruth sets aside any of her own remaining dignity to enter the field and gather barley in order for her and Naomi to survive.

NAOMI:

Why didn't I go myself? Why didn't I accompany Ruth into the fields? The story doesn't say, perhaps I was simply too old. Or perhaps the sorrows of my years had left me too frail to be much help. In any case, Ruth's gleaning – this care shown to me by a foreigner, my daughter-in-law – is what kept both of us alive.

NARRATOR:

When Boaz comes to the field where his workers are reaping the harvest, he notices Ruth, whom he doesn't recognize, following behind his workers and he inquires about her. The servant in charge tells him she is “the Moabite” who came back with Naomi, and he adds that Ruth has gleaned in the field tirelessly all day. In response, Boaz tells her that she is welcome to glean in his fields – indeed he urges her to glean *only in his fields* and invites her to share the water provided for his own workers. At the midday break he invites her to sit with the reapers and share their meal. And afterwards, he instructs his servants to allow Ruth to glean *even where they have not yet harvested* and to *toss some extra barley on the ground for her to collect*.

RUTH:

I was quite overwhelmed by his generosity, and I told him so – while bowing low to the ground in front of him. That's how we showed deep respect and honor to those whose place in life was far above our own. It wasn't just that he took his duty to the poor so seriously, but that he offered it so willingly to *me*, a foreigner. I had expected to be invisible, but he *saw* me.

BOAZ:

Word travels quickly in a small town. Although I didn't recognize her in the field, I had already heard about this foreign woman, Ruth, and her faithful companionship to Naomi, the widow of my kinsman. So I was sincere when I said to her, “May YHWH pay you in full for your loyalty! May you be richly rewarded by the Most High God of Israel,

under whose wings you have come to find shelter!" (Ruth 2:11-12 *TIB*) In fact, as soon as I spoke my blessing, I was strangely aware it was *she* who had spread her wings of refuge over Naomi ... and that it was *I*, through the barley in my fields, who was now spreading my wings of refuge around them both.

TOWNSPEOPLE-FIELDWORKERS:

They say beauty is in the eye of the beholder. And when the eye belongs to a beholder who is *just*, mercy looks beautiful. We could see that something sparked in Boaz already during that chance encounter in the field, but it belittles it to call it "love at first sight." Ruth was a young woman to be sure, but she was widowed already and, after working the whole morning in the field, she was hardly in a state to catch anyone's eye. But we knew Boaz to be a man moved by justice, and when he looked at Ruth he saw neither her physical beauty nor the toll of her years. He saw the mercy she showed Naomi and *that* moved him deeply.

RUTH:

At the end of the day, after separating the grain from the straw, I had an ephah of barley – about enough to fill a five-gallon bucket. It was a *very good* day of gleaning. And when Naomi saw how much I had gleaned she immediately asked whose field I had been gleaning in, because she knew someone had been looking out for me.

NAOMI:

When Ruth told me that she had been in the field belonging to Boaz my heart leapt, because he was a relative of my dead husband. This was God's kindness for sure. Most English Bibles say "close relative" or "nearest kin," but this doesn't capture the full significance of my words. More accurately, in Hebrew I told Ruth, "This Boaz is our redeemer-trustee" (Ruth 2:20 *TIB*); literally, he is the *one with the right to redeem*.

BOAZ:

"*One with the right to redeem.*" That's a big deal. It means that I might well have two significant opportunities – or obligations – with respect to Naomi. First, unless an even closer kin came forward, I would have the right to "redeem" – to claim for my use – any lands

that were held by Naomi's husband. Second, I also had the obligation to provide Naomi with an heir, through the custom of "levirate marriage." That meant that (whether or not I already had a wife – though I seem to have been unmarried) I had a duty to marry Naomi so that she might conceive an heir to care for her in her old age and to inherit her husband's land.

NARRATOR:

So Ruth gleaned in the fields of Boaz for the duration of the barley harvest, and for the wheat harvest as well. This lasted about three months, during which time Ruth became a familiar fixture following behind Boaz's fieldworkers, likely encountering Boaz on numerous occasions.

NAOMI:

This was surely God's doing, for the LORD is merciful to the poor and needy. And Ruth's ability to glean all these months ensured that we would have food for a long time. But there is more than food to security. And in this era the only *real* security for a woman was a husband, or at least a son to take care of her when she grew old. Because both Ruth and I had neither husband nor children, I began to plan for our security.

NARRATOR:

Naomi instructed Ruth in how to "seduce" Boaz. She picked a night that she knew Boaz would be alone in the grain house. She told Ruth to bathe and put on some perfume and to dress in her finest clothes. But Naomi also instructed her to hide until Boaz had eaten and fallen asleep. Then she was to go, lie down by Boaz, "uncover his feet," and wait for him to tell her what to do.

AUTHOR:

"Seduce" is a little strong, I think. There are clear sexual overtones here, but this is really a desperate attempt by Naomi through Ruth to gain security for both of them. Knowing that she herself was too old to bear a child, Naomi hoped that Boaz might be "encouraged" to "redeem" her family by taking Ruth as his wife and providing Naomi with an heir that way. Ruth's actions are pretty *forward* – in Hebrew "feet" can be a euphemism for genitals, so just what is Naomi suggesting that Ruth

uncover?! But they're also unmistakably *vulnerable*: regardless of what part of Boaz's physical anatomy she's uncovering, Ruth is also laying bare her future security, and that of Naomi as well. Boaz's response is far from certain, and she has everything to lose if this moment of sheer vulnerability on her part is not met with grace and mercy on his part.

RUTH:

I did just as my mother-in-law suggested. Once Boaz was asleep I crept in and lay beside him, uncovering his feet. No wonder when he awoke in the middle of the night he was startled to find me there! When he asked who I was – for he couldn't see me clearly in the darkness, I responded, "It's Ruth, your faithful one. Spread the corner of your cloak over me, for you are my family redeemer." (Ruth 3:9 *TIB*) I was not asking literally to be covered by a blanket; I was asking, begging, hoping that Boaz would *take me as his wife*.

AUTHOR:

When you realize what's happening here – that Ruth is hoping for an heir, that she is asking Boaz to father a child with her, a child that will become not his heir but Naomi's heir – you can see just how uncovered his "feet" are ... and just how desperate her hope is.

BOAZ:

I suppose I was startled – wouldn't you be? But what truly astonished me yet again was Ruth's compassion for Naomi. I told her, "May YHWH bless you, my child. You have shown yourself even more loyal to the family than you did before. You could have sought someone younger, whether poor or rich." (Ruth 3:10 *TIB*) Ruth was under no obligation to provide Naomi with an heir. She could have married solely for herself. By coming to me she made clear that she had bound up her security with Naomi's – even within a family such loyalty is rare, and here was a Moabite widow, someone who was *not* one of us, offering it to Naomi.

NARRATOR:

Boaz pledged on the spot to fulfill Ruth's request, noting that all of the Hebrews knew that she, Ruth, was a woman "of great character and integrity" (despite being Moabite). But he also cautions that he knows there is one relative closer to Naomi's husband than he is, and that

person has the first right to redeem if he wishes to.

RUTH:

Suddenly my vulnerability becomes all too clear. Having just offered myself to this man that I'd come to trust over the past several months I now learned that first thing the next morning I might be passed on to a complete stranger! This isn't a betrayal on the part of Boaz; he's simply determined to do everything with honor, but in a patriarchal society honor is measured more by the minds of men than by the lives of women.

NARRATOR:

True to his word, Boaz goes to the city gate the next morning because this is where the men gather to do the town's business. As soon as he spots the other relative, the one who has the first right to redeem, he calls him over and gathers ten elders of the city to act as witnesses. He explains that Naomi wants to sell the land that belonged to her dead husband and that Boaz is willing to redeem the land for himself but knows that this other man has first rights if he wishes to claim them.

AUTHOR:

And, of course, this other relative says, yes, he'll redeem the land. Who wouldn't want to expand their estate a bit? So he'll buy it from Naomi, and she can live off the proceeds until they're exhausted. But then Boaz adds a little "fine print." He mentions that whoever redeems the land *also* gets Ruth – and Ruth comes with the obligation to sire an heir. All of sudden this isn't such a good deal. Let's see, he pays to buy the land. He picks up the cost of having a wife. He accepts the duty to father a child. And this child will have a lineage traced back to Naomi's husband, not to him – and will one day inherit away from his family the very land he's spending money to buy today. This is no longer a good business deal and so he renounces his right to redeem and offers it to Boaz.

BOAZ:

I immediately claimed my right to redeem, announcing to the elders, "You are witnesses this day that I have bought all of Elimelech's property from Naomi, as well as the property of [her two sons]."

Further, I will marry Ruth the Moabite widow, in order to keep the name of our dead relative connected with the property, so that his name will not be forgotten among our relatives or in the town records. You are my witnesses this day." (Ruth 4:9-10 *TIB*) Those few words sold and bought the land and effectively married Ruth to me as well.

NAOMI :

True enough. Those few words put everything that had been out of place – myself, my husband's land, and my daughter-in-law – back *in place*.

TOWNSPEOPLE-GATHERED AT THE GATE :

But we – the ordinary people gathered by the gate alongside the elders – we also offered words that shaped this passing of property and people. We said this blessing: "May YHWH make Ruth, who is about to come into your home, to be like Rachel and Leah, the two who built up the family of Israel. May the children YHWH gives to you make your family like the family of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah." (Ruth 4:11-12 *TIB*) Our words of blessing set this otherwise ordinary transaction within the extraordinary story of God's care for God's people.

The story of Leah and Rachel is found in Genesis chapters 29-35. The story of Tamar is found in Genesis chapter 38.

BOAZ :

Extraordinary, indeed. You probably recognize Leah and Rachel as the two sisters married by Jacob. Along with their respective maidservants, they gave Jacob the twelve sons who became the twelve tribes of Israel. To liken a Moabite woman to the very foremothers of Israel is a pretty daring blessing. As for Tamar, she was a widow whose right to levirate marriage was denied generations earlier and who needed her own act of desperate "seduction" to gain an heir and thus continue the bloodline that eventually led to my own birth six generations later.

RUTH :

I suppose in this moment I could have felt like just another part of the property changing hands – in some ways that's exactly what I was. But remember, I was moving from a place of sheer vulnerability to a place of security – and Naomi was coming with me. We were being gathered together into the household of a man we knew to be both just

and merciful. We had a future before us again. And that was cause for wordless gratitude on my part.

NARRATOR:

And so Boaz took Ruth as his wife. Naomi was made safe as a member of their household. And in time God blessed Boaz and Ruth with a son.

TOWNSPEOPLE-WOMEN:

When he was born, we rejoiced for our kinswoman, Naomi. We said to her, "Praised be YHWH, who has not abandoned you, but provided you with yet another redeemer! May this child's name be remembered through all of Israel – and give you renewed life and support you when you are old! For your daughter-in-law who loves you and has proven better than seven sons, has given birth to him." (Ruth 4:14-15 *TIB*)

NAOMI:

Filled with joy, I took my grandson into my arms, and, cradling him, I saw hope in this tiny babe. Not just for myself and for Ruth, but for all of God's children, for the story that led to his birth is a witness to the God who seeks always to care for the poor, to bring the outcasts in, to invite those at the margins to the center – and who does all these things through the choices that we human beings make. And in this story, Ruth and Boaz and I were privileged to make choices that invited God to act in our lives.

NARRATOR:

And the story ends like this: "And Naomi's neighbors named the child, saying, 'A son has been born to Naomi; we will call him Obed [which means "faithful one"].' And Obed begot Jesse – and Jesse begot David." (Ruth 4:17 *TIB*)

[Participants might refer to the Timeline Chart as the next two speakers read their lines.]

AUTHOR:

It all ends so quickly that when you hear it today, 2500 years after I wrote it, you might think I'm simply bringing it all together and closing it up. But actually *this bursts everything wide open*. This single verse takes the whole story to another level. Remember the

context in which I wrote. David was Israel's greatest king. But 500 years after his rule and with the much more recent pain of Exile fresh in their hearts, the Israelites are wrestling with how to share their land and their faith with foreigners. Ezra and Nehemiah have called for the expulsion of all foreign wives from among the people of Israel, specifically naming Moabite women as among those needing to be expelled. And here, in the middle of this wrestling, sits my story of Ruth. I lift up from our past a Moabite woman who displays a loyalty to family and a faith in God equal to any biblical hero. And I celebrate her intermarriage with Boaz, which keeps alive a bloodline that would otherwise have died out – a bloodline that in just two more generations will produce David, the shepherd-king.

THIRD ISAIAH:

In fact, some of my most stirring words, crafted in the midst of this same struggle, are these: "Foreigners who would follow YHWH should not say, 'YHWH will surely exclude me from this people.'" *That was exactly what Ezra and Nehemiah were doing to women like Ruth.* But I responded, "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)

AUTHOR:

I like to think that my short story about Ruth and her acceptance into the people of God sowed seeds that bore fruit in Martin Luther King's famous hope: "I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character." Grounded in the conviction of God's gracious and surprising love, that was my hope, and Ruth's hope, and Isaiah's hope. *Is it yours, too?*

* * *

[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) of 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 may seem so foreign, so other to us — speaking as Naomi, Ruth, Boaz, the Townspeople, 3rd Isaiah, the Author, 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. Therefore it's important for each small group to share their insights with the whole group. Otherwise, this is an opportunity for a little longer conversation that will wrap up the experience.]

NARRATOR:

Our last task is to step back into our own voices and identify some of the insights we gained. So thinking about either the story of Ruth 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 characters in this story (Naomi, Ruth, Boaz, the Townspeople, 3rd Isaiah, and the Author) 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.

Timeline

Understanding the relationship between *the story told within* the Book of Ruth and *the historical setting of the writing of* the Book of Ruth (likely 500-600 years later).

BCE Timeline

(years before
the Common Era)

Events occurring:

1100 BCE *Approximate date for the events in the Book of Ruth.*

1075-1025 BCE Ruth gives birth to Obed, who becomes father to Jesse, who becomes father to David.

1000 BCE David becomes king in Israel.

922 BCE Civil War splits Israel into two kingdom: Israel in the North; Judah in the South.

750 BCE Approximate date for the events in the Book of Jonah.

722 BCE The Assyrian Empire conquers and scatters the Northern Kingdom of Israel. During this time the original prophet named Isaiah is active.

597-587 BCE The Babylonian Empire conquers Assyria as well as the Southern Kingdom of Judah and carries these last two tribes of Israel into Exile in Babylon.

539 BCE The Persian Empire conquers Babylon and chooses to allow all the Exiles of Judah to return to the area around Jerusalem. During this time a *second* prophetic voice writes under the name Isaiah; scholars call this voice “Second Isaiah.”

520-515 BCE The Exiles (now free) work to rebuild the Temple.

535-435 BCE During this period (about the first 100 years after the Exile ends) the people of Israel are asking the very tough question, “Why did the national disaster of the Exile happen?”

This is the period when Ezra and Nehemiah forbid inter-marriage (and break up existing mixed marriages.)

This is also the era when a *third* prophetic voice writes under the name Isaiah; scholars call this voice “Third Isaiah.” This prophet challenges the viewpoint of Ezra and Nehemiah — *this is the character in the Reader’s Theater.*

And this is the era when many scholars believe that both the Books of Ruth and Jonah were written. If true, these authors chose to write vivid tales about characters in Israel's past in order to convey their understanding of God and relate it to Israel's life in the present. The Books of Ruth and Jonah, like the message of Third Isaiah, present an image of a much more inclusive God than is seen in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah.

Thus, the biblical writings (Ezra, Nehemiah, Third Isaiah, Ruth, and Jonah) produced during this last era (535-435 BCE) give us a glimpse into a time when the people of God were actively wrestling with how best to speak about God in light of enormous changes and challenges in the world around them.

CHAPTER 1

Long ago, when judges governed Israel, a famine swept over the land. So a family from the town of Bethlehem in Judah, a woman and man and their two children, emigrated to the region of Moab. The man was named Elimelech, the woman's name was Naomi, and their two sons were named Mahlon and Chilon. They were Ephrathites, that is, from Bethlehem of Judah. They arrived in the land of Moab and settled there.

Soon afterward Elimelech died, leaving Naomi and the two sons to fend for themselves. The two sons eventually married two Moabite women, whose names were Orpah and Ruth. They lived in the land of Moab for about ten years when both Mahlon and Chilon died.

Now that Naomi had lost both of her children as well as her husband, she prepared to take her daughters-in-law and leave the land of Moab and return to her homeland, for she had heard that YHWH had visited the people by providing an abundance of food.

So she and her two daughters-in-law left the house where they had been living, and she set out on the road to Judah. But Naomi told each of her daughters-in-law, "Return to your mother's house. May the Most High care for you with the same kindness that you have cared for your dead and for me. May the Most High give you security and true fulfillment, and lead you to new spouses." Then she kissed them both.

But they wept loudly and said to her, "No we want to go back with you to the land of your people!"

But Naomi said to them, "Go back, my daughters. Why do you want to come with me? I have no more sons inside me that you can take as spouses. No, you must go back, my daughters. I am too old to marry again. Even if I told you that there was still hope for me, if I were to find a spouse and have children tonight, would you be willing to wait until they are grown to marry them? Would you refuse to remarry for this far-off hope? No, if you did that, it would tear me apart, for the hand of the Most High has been raised against me."

And once more they wept loudly. Then Orpah kissed Naomi and returned to her people. But Ruth stayed by her side.

Naomi said to Ruth, "Look, your sister-in-law has returned to her people and to the god of her ancestors. You too must go. Follow your sister-in-law."

But Ruth said to her, "Please don't ask me to leave you and turn away from your company. I swear to you:

Where you go, I will go;
where you lodge, I will lodge.
Your people will be my people,
and your God, my God.
Where you die, I'll die there too
and I will be buried there beside you.
I swear — may YHWH be my witness and judge —
that not even death will keep us apart."

Seeing that Ruth was determined to accompany her, Naomi said no more. And together they walked, until they came to Bethlehem.

When they arrived, the town was abuzz with gossip because of them. The townspeople said to each other, "Could this sad person be Naomi, our 'Joy'?"

But she said to them, "Don't call me Naomi. Call me Mara, 'Bitterness,' for YHWH has afflicted me, and Shaddai has brought bitter destruction on me. I was filled to the brim when I departed, but YHWH has brought me back empty. Why insist on calling me Naomi, since YHWH has passed sentence upon me and Shaddai has brought me to ruin?"

And that is how Naomi left the land of Moab with Ruth the Moabite and returned to Bethlehem, arriving just as the barley harvest was beginning.

CHAPTER 2

Now Naomi had a relative on her husband's side from the clan of Elimelech. His name was Boaz, and he was well-to-do.

One day Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi, "Let me go into the fields and be a gleaner, gathering the leftover grain behind anyone who will take pity on me."

And Naomi said, "Go ahead, my daughter."

So Ruth went out to the fields to follow the harvesters and gather the grain that they dropped. As providence would have it, she came to the part of the field that was owned by Boaz, of Elimelech's clan.

It so happened that Boaz had just returned from Bethlehem. He greeted the harvesters by calling out, "YHWH be with you!"

They shouted back, "YHWH bless you!"

Then Boaz turned to the supervisor in charge of the harvesters and asked, "Who does that woman work for?"

The supervisor of the harvesters replied, "She is the Moabite who returned from the land of Moab with Naomi. She asked our permission to collect the grain that the workers dropped. She has been working steadily since early morning, with scarcely any rest."

Then Boaz said to Ruth, "Listen to my words, my child, and accept my offer: don't collect your grain in anyone else's fields but mine and don't leave here, stay with my binders. Watch them closely, and whatever part of the field they are harvesting, follow behind them. I have ordered all my reapers not to bother you. When you get thirsty, go to the water jars they bring with them and get a drink of water."

Ruth bowed down to the ground and said to Boaz, "How have I come to deserve your favor so much that you take care of me? I'm just a foreigner."

Boaz replied, "I have heard how you have cared for your mother-in-law since your husband died, and how you left your own family and the land where you were born to come to live here among strangers. May YHWH pay you in full for your loyalty! May you be richly rewarded by the Most High God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to find shelter!"

Ruth said, "May you find me deserving of your kindness. You have treated me gently and given me solace even though I am not one of your workers."

When noontime arrived, Boaz said to her, "Come here and share my bread and dip some of it in the wine." Ruth sat with the rest of the workers while Boaz prepared a bowl of roasted barley as a snack. She ate until she was no longer hungry and still had some left over. Then she got up to continue her gathering.

Boaz ordered the binders, "Let her pick from among the bundles you have gathered, and do not hinder her. In fact, go so far as to drop some grain from your bundles, and let her collect it without fear."

Ruth continued to gather in the field until evening. Then she winnowed what she had collected and had enough grain to fill a whole basket. She picked up the basket and carried it into town.

When she arrived home, Ruth showed the basket to Naomi,

and gave her the leftovers from her meal. When she saw all this, Naomi asked, "Where did you go today? Where have you been working? God bless whoever took care of you!"

Then Ruth told Naomi in whose field she had been working. "The owner of the fields where I worked today is named Boaz."

Then Naomi said, "May he receive blessings from YHWH who has not stopped showing tender love to both the living and the dead!"

"This Boaz," Naomi continued, "is a close relative of ours — he is our redeemer- trustee."

Ruth the Moabite said, "He also told me 'Follow my binders until they have finished with the harvest.'"

Naomi told her daughter-in-law, "This is very good news. It will be better to stay in his fields where you will be safe than to go to someone else's fields where you will be in danger."

So Ruth stayed with Boaz's workers and worked as a gleaner until the harvest was complete. During this time she continued to live with her mother-in-law.

CHAPTER 3

One day, Naomi said to Ruth, "My daughter, it's my duty to ensure your security and fulfillment, and make sure you are provided for. And Boaz, whose workers you have been following, is our closest relative. Tonight he'll be winnowing grain on the threshing floor. Wash up and put on perfume and dress in your finest clothes. Then go down to the threshing floor. But don't let him know you're there until he has finished eating and drinking.

"When he goes to sleep, watch to see where he lies down. Then go and 'uncover his feet' and lie down with him. He'll tell you what to do next."

Ruth replied, "I will do as you tell me." So she went down to the threshing floor just as her mother-in-law told her to do.

Boaz ate and drank until he was tipsy. Then he went to sleep against the bundles of grain. When Boaz was asleep, Ruth silently approached, laid down next to him, and "uncovered his feet." In the middle of the night, Boaz awoke and was startled to find a woman lying at his feet.

"Who's there?" Boaz asked.

She replied, "It's Ruth, your faithful one. Spread the corner

of your cloak over me, for you are my family redeemer.”

“May YHWH bless you, my child,” Boaz replied. “You have shown yourself even more loyal to the family than you did before. You could have sought someone younger, whether rich or poor. Rest easy, my child, I am more than willing to do what you ask. Everyone knows that you are a person of great character and integrity.

“But there is a problem: it is true that I am a close relative, but there is another who is even more closely related to you than I am. Stay here tonight, and I’ll go and talk to him in the morning. If he wishes to carry out his obligations as a redeemer-trustee, that is his right. If not, then as YHWH lives, I will marry you! Now rest your head until morning.”

So Ruth lay at his feet until the morning, but got up before dawn so that no one else would see that she had been there. Boaz thought it best that no one know she had been to the threshing floor.

Before she left, Boaz said, “Bring me your cloak and hold it out.” When she did so, he poured out six measures of grain and lifted it for her to carry. Then Ruth went back to town.

When she returned home, Naomi asked, “So, how did it go with you, my daughter?”

Ruth told her all that had happened, and added, “Boaz also gave me six measures of grain; he didn’t want me to come home to you empty-handed.”

Naomi advised her, “Let’s wait and see what happens. Boaz won’t rest until the matter is settled today.”

CHAPTER 4

In the meantime, Boaz went to the main gate of the town and waited there for the arrival of the relative he had mentioned. When that person arrived, Boaz called him by name and said, “Come and sit with me.” When the relative sat down, Boaz stopped ten respected citizens in the town and asked them to sit there with them. When they were all seated, Boaz addressed his relative:

“You may remember that piece of land that belonged to our relative Elimelech. Naomi is selling it now that she has returned from Moab. I promised to discuss the matter with you and ask you to stake your claim on it in the presence of these august citizens. If you are willing to do your redemption duty in the family, then do so. Otherwise, please let me know, for you’re the only other person with the right

of redemption in the family — I’m in line after you.”

The relative answered, “Yes, I will fulfill my family ‘obligation.’”

Boaz continued, “If you accept this, you realize that on the day you buy the land from Naomi and Ruth the Moabite, you’re also obligated to marry Ruth, the Moabite who returned with Naomi, so as to perpetuate the name of our dead relative and keep it connected to the property.”

At this the relative said, “Oh, then I can’t redeem it. Such an obligation may cut into my already existing property. I cannot do it, you must take on the obligation yourself!”

In those times in Israel, it was the custom that when the redemption had been agreed to and the property contract had been ratified, one person should remove a sandal and hand it to the other party. This was the method for ratifying transactions in Israel. So when the relative said to Boaz, “Redeem it yourself,” he took off his sandal and handed it to Boaz.

Then Boaz addressed the group who had gathered there: “You are the witnesses this day that I have bought all of Elimelech’s property from Naomi, as well as the property of Chilion and Mahlon. Further, I will marry Ruth the Moabite, Mahlon’s widow, in order to keep the name of our dead relative connected with the property, so that his name will not be forgotten among our relatives or in the town records. You are my witnesses this day.”

Everyone who assembled at the gate, including the prominent citizens, said, “We are your witnesses!

May YHWH make Ruth,
who is about to come into your home,
to be like Rachel and Leah,
the two who built up the family of Israel.
May the children YHWH gives to you
make your family like the family of Perez,
whom Tamar bore to Judah.”

So Ruth and Boaz were married. And from their union, YHWH enabled Ruth to conceive and she gave birth to a child.

Then the women of the village said to Naomi,

“Praised be YHWH,
who has not abandoned you
but provided you with yet another redeemer!
May the child’s name be remembered through all of Israel —

and give you renewed life
and support when you are old!
For your daughter-in-law,
who loves you and has proven better
than seven of your own children could ever have been,
has given birth to him.”

Naomi took the child into her lap and she became his
caretaker. 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.

Here, then, is the complete lineage of the Perez family:

Perez begot Hezron;
Hezron begot Ram;
Ram begot Amminadab;
Amminadab begot Nahshon;
Nahshon begot Salmon;
Salmon begot Boaz;
Boaz begot Obed;
Obed begot Jesse;
and Jesse begot David.

HEARTS UNBOUND

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

by David R. Weiss

2

MUCH MORE THAN A BIG FISH TALE:
God's Reluctant Prophet to the Unchosen

THE BOOK OF JONAH

National Gay and Lesbian
Task Force



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Hearts Unbound

by David R. Weiss

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

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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 the story of Jonah from the inside, through seven roles created to bring insight to this key biblical tale. These roles are: (1) Jonah, the prophet, (2) Men on the boat, (3) King of Nineveh, (4) Author, (5) 3rd Isaiah — a prophetic voice contemporary to the book of Jonah, (6-7) two Narrators. If necessary, to accommodate groups of six or eight, the Men on the Boat and King can be read by one person, or the Author role can be shared by two persons.

The largest role here is the Author, followed by the roles for Jonah, 3rd Isaiah, and the two Narrators. The Men on the Boat and the King are the smallest roles, each having only two to three lines. None of the roles are overwhelming; no one speaks more than ten sentences at a time and most speeches are only four to five sentences long. But you may appreciate having the option of choosing a larger or smaller part overall.

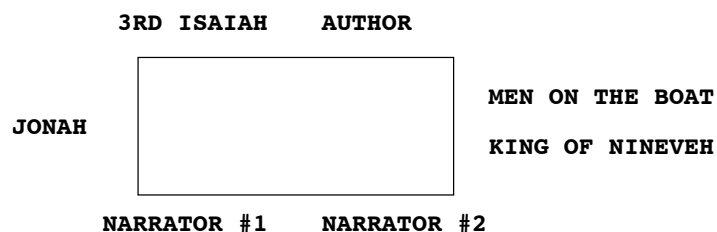
The Narrators will guide you through the story of Jonah, summarizing the plot line and helping transition from one scene to the next. The Narrators likely haven't seen any of this material before either, so these persons aren't the "experts," their role is simply to keep things moving along. You'll have a chance to add your own comments and questions at the end, so feel free to 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 the story of Jonah.

Like many of the biblical narratives themselves, this script features only male characters. I deliberated whether to create and insert a female character here, but in this case it felt too editorially intrusive. This is a story that plays out between male characters. As in all the scripts, people of any gender should feel free to take on male roles. ~DW

Note: Getting "inside" the Book of Jonah is tricky. There's a complex relationship between the events described in the tale, the overall message of the story, and the historical context of its actual writing. It's too important a tale to set aside just because of this complexity — but impossible to understand without addressing these things. The characters explain this in the Theater itself, but there is also a chart at the end of the script that allows participants to see this complexity laid out on a timeline. The chart might be distributed and referred to as necessary.

Suggestion: It may help keep the roles/voices clear for everyone if the Narrators sit at one end of the group, with Jonah to one side and the Men on the Boat and the King of Nineveh to the other side. 3rd Isaiah and the Author might sit opposite the Narrators. You might also consider making large name places to put in front of people to identify their role.



Note: While the book of Jonah is only four chapters long, it's too long to incorporate in its entirety into this Reader's Theater, so the characters summarize the action and lift up the key points. Everyone will be able to follow things, even if they haven't read the whole book, but it would be helpful to encourage participants to read the entire book of Jonah beforehand. (By generous permission of the publisher, the Book of Jonah appears in its entirety as an appendix to this Reader's Theater.)

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

Our task is to revisit each of the scenes in the Book of Jonah 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.

JONAH:

My name is _____, and I'll be reading the part of **Jonah**, the only Hebrew (Jewish) prophet sent by God, not to his own people, but to Assyrians, people who were not only not Hebrews but who were perceived as enemies.

3rd ISAIAH:

My name is _____, and I'll be reading the part of **Third Isaiah**, the author of the final chapters (56-66) of the Book of Isaiah. Although not a participant in the scene here, his words belong in this conversation, so his voice has been introduced into this Reader's Theater.

AUTHOR:

My name is _____, and I'll be reading the part of the **Author**, the unknown writer who created the Book of Jonah. In this role I will offer "behind the scenes" comments to help you understand the story from the author's perspective.

MEN ON THE BOAT:

My name is _____, and I'll be reading the part of the **Men on the Boat**, speaking for the professional sailors who happened to be the crew on the boat Jonah used in his attempt to run away from God.

KING:

My name is _____, and I'll be reading the part of **King of Nineveh**, the ruler of Assyria whose palace was in Nineveh, the capital city of the Assyrian Empire.

NARRATOR (2):

My name is _____, and I'll be reading the part of the **Narrator (2)**. In this role I will summarize the plot from the Book

of Jonah. 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 summarize the plot from the Book of Jonah, help us transition from scene to scene, and occasionally offer some extra insight into the text.

NARRATOR (2):

Okay, we'll begin with a few background comments on the Book of Jonah. Then we'll turn to the story itself.

AUTHOR:

Like most of the books of the Bible, the Book of Jonah does not identify its author, which is a shame because I wouldn't mind a little credit for having crafted such a biting satire with such a gracious message. That's history for you. Everyone knows Jonah – even though he's just a fictional character in my book – but nobody knows me! I didn't bother to date my book either. I mean, I wrote it for the people living alongside me. Who thought that a couple thousand years later folks like you would be reading it? Anyway, most scholars think I wrote sometime after the Exile, maybe between 500 and 300 BCE. Whatever the exact date, the tale of Jonah speaks directly to Israel's life after the Exile, as they wrestled with whether God's love could include people beyond Israel.

NARRATOR (1):

Let me jump in to clarify how we'll be dating things. "BCE" means "Before the Common Era;" it's the same timeline as "BC," which meant "Before Christ," but BCE is used by scholars today to recognize that not everyone regards Jesus as *Christ*. Still, Jesus' birth *is* what marks the beginning of the "Common Era," so when you hear BCE it simply means the number of years before the Common Era began, which is also the number of years before the birth of Jesus.

3rd ISAIAH:

Okay, to make matters even more complicated, I'm also an "unknown" author. I'm the voice behind the final chapters of the Book of Isaiah.

Virtually all scholars acknowledge that most of the first 39 chapters of Isaiah has roots in the prophet Isaiah, who was active from 740-687 BCE. That's right *before* and right *after* Israel's Northern Kingdom fell to the Assyrian Empire. But the material in chapters 40-55 comes from a different voice and reflects a different time. Often referred to as "Second Isaiah," this un-named prophet was active around the time that the Babylonian Exile was ending, some 150 years later than the original Isaiah. And many scholars hear yet another voice in chapters 56-66, a *third* prophet who sees himself continuing the legacy of Isaiah, but who is now speaking to Israel's reality *after* they've returned from the Exile, perhaps just a generation or two after Second Isaiah. *That third voice is me.*

[Participants might pause and locate Third Isaiah on the Timeline Chart – and keep the Chart close by as the next five speakers fill out the history and context for the story.]

AUTHOR:

I know this can all seem kind of complicated and a bit hard to follow; after all this isn't your history, it's *ours*. But bear with us, because the history sets the context for understanding my story about Jonah. The setting for my *tale* is around 750 BCE just a couple decades *before* the Exile – that's when the story takes place. But the setting for my *writing* – and for the people *hearing* the story – is a generation or more *after* the Exile. And in *that* setting my story is less about "Jonah and the miracle of a big fish" than about "Jonah and the miracle of a big God." Knowing the backdrop brings the message into focus.

3rd ISAIAH:

So before we turn to the tale, keep this in mind. In 722 BCE the Northern Kingdom, comprising almost all of Israel, was conquered by the Assyrian Empire and scattered to the four winds. This national disaster is the source of "the lost tribes of Israel:" after 722 BCE these ten tribes were effectively lost to history. About 130 years later, between 597 and 587 BCE another regional superpower, Babylon, conquered Assyria and swallowed up the last remnant of Israel, then known as the Kingdom of Judah. These last Israelites – members of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin – were deported to Babylon, where they lived in exile for about fifty years.

AUTHOR:

Then, around 539 BCE, a third regional superpower arose, the Persian Empire led by Cyrus, and they conquered the Babylonians. Cyrus decided to let the Israelites, who had been living in exile in Babylon, return to their homeland. Many of them did, and over the next hundred years one of the driving theological questions for the people of Israel became, "What went wrong... why did the Exile happen?" One of the reasons most often given was that Israel had been "too friendly" with its neighbors, and the resulting intermarriages had led to their being attracted to foreign gods.

3rd ISAIAH:

One response was an emphasis on ethnic purity. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah relate how first a priest (Ezra) and then a governor (Nehemiah) declared that God was opposed to all intermarriage. But this wasn't the only view. There were other biblical voices – like mine, and the authors of both Ruth and Jonah – who understood God in ways that ran counter to Ezra and Nehemiah.

AUTHOR:

So I offered my story about Jonah to the imagination of Israel in the midst of this debate about how to treat foreigners – which was also a debate about how God regards foreigners. Most scholars consider my story to be *historical fiction*, sometimes it's even referred to as *satire* or *parody* for its over-the-top style. I take that as a compliment. But that doesn't mean it was any less "inspired" than other imaginative tales like, say, Jesus' parables. Just like the parables, the truth of my tale doesn't rest on the history it tells but on the insight it offers, the message about God that it bears. Now, let's turn to the tale itself.

NARRATOR (2):

In the first scene we hear that the word of the Lord came to Jonah, son of Amittai, telling him "Get up! Go to the great city of Nineveh right now. Raise a cry against it! Tell them that I know all about their crimes." (Jonah 1:2 *TIB*)

AUTHOR:

There! If you're an Israelite well-versed in your own history you know right away when this tale takes place. You're not? Okay, I'll clue you in. In 2nd Kings 14:25 a single verse mentions a prophet Jonah, son of Amittai, who directed King Jeroboam to restore the boundaries of Israel around 750 BCE. It's the only biblical reference outside my story to a historical person named Jonah. Now remember, I'm not writing history myself – this is an *imaginative* tale. But I want my hearers to know that this story takes place some 300 years before they're hearing it, just as Assyria is getting ready to overwhelm – indeed obliterate – the very boundaries that Jeroboam had just restored. And Nineveh is the capital city of Assyria. So God is asking Jonah to go warn Israel's worst enemy lest God destroy them.

"He [King Jeroboam] was the one who restored the boundaries of Israel from Lebo Hamath to the Sea of Arabah, in accordance with the word of YHWH, the God of Israel, spoken through his servant, Jonas ben-Amittai, the prophet from Gath Hepher."
(2nd Kings 14:25 *TIB*)

JONAH:

So now maybe you understand what comes next. For generations I've been called reluctant, rebellious, recalcitrant. *But this is Israel's worst enemy.* Nineveh is the capital city of the nation poised to utterly destroy us. Other prophets are sent to warn the people of Israel; I'm the *only* prophet sent to an *unchosen* people. What would you have done?

NARRATOR (1):

Well, what Jonah does is indeed "go" – but as fast and far as he can in the *other* direction. He boards a ship heading due west while Nineveh lies due east. But then a great storm came up, so fierce that it threatened to sink the ship. The sailors feared for their lives, throwing all the cargo overboard and imploring their various gods to save them. Meanwhile Jonah was fast asleep in the hold of the ship while all this was going on.

AUTHOR:

I mentioned my "over-the-top" style early. It begins right here. Almost like a cartoon scene, I write that God "unleashed a violent wind" and that "the storm threatened to break up the ship" (Jonah 1:4 *TIB*) – in Hebrew the word portrays the boat itself crying out as if to

say, "Hey, guys, find another ship, I'm going to pieces!" And in the midst of this storm that no one could ignore, Jonah ... is fast asleep?! Who does he think he is, sleeping through a storm on a boat – Jesus Christ? Well, these are early clues to my hearers that whatever point I'm trying to make in my story, I'm *not* trying to be taken literally.

"Then a fierce gale arose, and the waves were breaking into the boat so much that it was almost swamped. But Jesus was in the stern through it all, sound asleep on a cushion."
(Mark 4:37-38a *TIB*)

MEN ON THE BOAT:

But some parts of the story are all too real, like the description of us throwing cargo overboard and pleading with our gods. Sailing has never been for the faint of heart. And there were plenty of storms that could smash a ship to pieces. And in such a storm we would've tossed the cargo overboard to try and save the ship. And we would've prayed to every god we knew, hoping that one of us might call out to a god who happened to be listening.

NARRATOR (2):

Soon enough the captain of the vessel finds Jonah asleep. He rouses Jonah and tells him to start praying, too, in case maybe *his* god "will spare a thought for us." (Jonah 1:6 *TIB*) Meanwhile, the sailors, who often interpreted a stormy sea as the sign of an angry god, cast lots – they threw dice – to determine who had angered the gods. Of course, the lot falls to Jonah. So they question him to learn what he's done to make his god so angry.

3rd ISAIAH:

Understand that up until this point in history – not just the story's *setting* in 750 BCE, but the story's *telling*, after the Exile (450 BCE) – *everyone*, including Israelites, took it for granted that there were many gods. Monotheism, the belief there that is only one God, is just beginning to appear, even in Israel. In fact, it's partly the notion of monotheism that raises the question this story asks: if there's only one God, does that God care only about Israel, or might that God care about *all* people?

MEN ON THE BOAT:

In any case, when the captain brings Jonah up on deck and we discover that he's the cause of all of this, our fear gets tinged with anger. He's endangered all of us by using *our* boat to run away from *his* god. So we asked him what he could do to calm his god so that hopefully his god would calm the sea.

AUTHOR:

I like Jonah. He's my best-known character after all. But you have to understand that sometimes I make him do things – ironically – to make my point. So at this point in the story, Jonah, who you'll discover at the end of the story already knows that God's fundamental character is compassion, tells the men, "Take me and throw me into the sea." (Jonah 1:12 *TIB*)

MEN ON THE BOAT:

We didn't know anything about Jonah's god, but we weren't sure that killing him would make things better. So instead we rowed as hard as we could to reach land. We didn't want Jonah's blood on us or on our boat. Only when we realized that we had no choice, did we cry out, "Please, O YHWH, we pray, don't let us perish for taking this person's life. Don't hold us guilty of innocent blood; for you, O YHWH, acted as you have thought right." (Jonah 1:14 *TIB*) And then we threw him into the sea.

NARRATOR (1):

Immediately the sea calmed, which filled the sailors with even greater fear. They made a sacrifice to God then and there. And each one made the sort of vows humans make when their lives have just been saved from a great calamity: that is, they promised many things they would forget by the next time they reached port. But God never wanted Jonah's life, so God didn't allow Jonah to drown. Instead, as the story tells it, "Then YHWH sent a huge fish to swallow Jonah, and he remained in the fish's belly for three days and three nights." (Jonah 2:1 *TIB*)

AUTHOR:

I have a love-hate relationship with that line. It's simple, elegant, and it helps the story turn an essential corner, but it's otherwise

entirely beside the point. It has no real significance at all! Yet this is the one line that everyone from Sunday School kids to grownups knows: Jonah got swallowed by a fish. *Really? Could a fish really swallow a man? What sort of fish is big enough for that? Or was it a whale? And for three days? Really? For literally seventy-two hours, or was I being symbolic? How did he breathe? How did he hold up in the stomach acid?* I suppose I'm glad I didn't have him scooped up by a submarine driven by extraterrestrials! But for all the attention this gets – and for as much as it keeps people from noticing my real point – I wish I'd had him grab a piece of the cargo just tossed into the sea and let him cling to that through the night while he prayed.

3rd ISAIAH:

As someone else who dared to proclaim the wideness of God's love to a people who preferred to keep it more comfortably narrow, I have to say that we humans are often eager to distract ourselves with the most far-fetched notions in order to avoid encountering the ones that really challenge us.

NARRATOR (2):

Then, from the belly of the fish, Jonah prayed. His prayer, much like a psalm of personal lament, begins with a cry of distress, reaches a depth of sheer hopelessness, and then credits his rescue to God. He pledges, "I will fulfill the vow I made," and concludes with a triumphant cry, – uttered while still in the fish's belly – "Deliverance comes from YHWH!" (Jonah 2:10 *TIB*) And then God spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out onto dry land.

AUTHOR:

Not a pretty image, I know. But it's a good prayer. And if the story had ended here, Jonah would come across almost like a hero of the faith. But remember what the Narrator said a few moments ago, about the vows we're all quick to make when our lives have just been saved from a great calamity, promising things we forget just as quickly? Well, Jonah's vow is a bit like that.

NARRATOR (1):

But not at first. Because this time God again spoke to Jonah, telling him to go preach a warning to the city of Nineveh. And this time Jonah went. When he reached the city he found that it was enormous – three days walk from one end to the other. And this was his message: “Only forty days more, and Nineveh is going to be destroyed!” (Jonah 3:4)

JONAH:

In the capitol city of my enemies, I walked through the streets like a fearless man. Forty days – count ‘em off – forty days and this city will be destroyed. Believe me, this was at least a message I could put my heart into.

NARRATOR (2):

And the people repented, hoping that perhaps God would relent and spare their lives. And God...

AUTHOR:

Wait a second! This is some of my best stuff. In case anybody had been starting to take things too seriously after the psalm and all, I’m reminding you here again that this is *parody*. This is *not* the way it ever happens. Only in this story. Only to make my point. So tell them..

KING:

Well, we, the people of Nineveh, didn’t just “believe,” we proclaimed a fast. And everyone in our great city, from nobles to peasants, put on sackcloth.

AUTHOR:

It *never* happens like this. Read the prophets. They can’t pay the people to believe. But here *everyone* believes. *Everyone* fasts. *Everyone* wears sackcloth. And it gets even better. Go on...

KING:

When word of Jonah’s message reached me, the king, I took off my robe, replaced it with sackcloth, and sat in ashes to show my complete humility. But I didn’t stop there. In order to make sure that our city’s response was complete, I issued a royal decree. I made fasting

the law of the land. I declared that not even animals could be fed. And that no one – human or animal – would drink. I even ordered that our livestock be covered in sackcloth to join us in showing our repentance.

AUTHOR:

See, it's like a cartoon again. It's way over the top. I'm shouting out as loud as possible between the lines: "Not meant to be taken literally. Something more is going on here. Wait for the punch line, it's coming!"

KING:

Finally, I commanded everyone – nobles and slaves alike, young and old, cattle and goats, dogs and cats – I declared that everyone should call on God with all their might. And I pronounced, "You must all renounce your sinful ways and the evil things you did. Who knows, maybe God will have a change of mind and relent! Perhaps God's burning wrath will be withdrawn so that we don't perish." (Jonah 3:8-9 *TIB*)

AUTHOR:

Any of the genuine historical prophets in Israel would trade places with Jonah in a heartbeat. People actually listening to your message? All of them? The king, too? This is *rich*. I hope you're enjoying this scene as much as I am.

JONAH:

Me? I feel like a fool. I mean I *saw* this coming. I didn't want to bring this message to those people precisely because of this possibility. They're not supposed to repent! *They're not God's chosen people!* God could care less about the Ninevites. In fact, the angels have a hellfire and brimstone package all set, marked "special delivery" and addressed to Nineveh.

NARRATOR (1):

But, God did see how the Ninevites repented, and God did relent. And the calamity that God had announced for Nineveh, God chose *not* to do it.

3rd ISAIAH:

This is big stuff here. Does God ever waffle on decisions? What would it mean if God changed God's own mind? In fact, the Hebrew word is the same word that describes the Ninevite's reaction: God *repented*. What could be so powerful to change God's mind? Was it merely the actions of the people? Do fasting and sackcloth and cries of repentance really have the power to manipulate God?

AUTHOR:

Nah. Here's part one of my big insight into God. You might call it my "revelation." I'm daring to suggest that there *is* something more powerful than God's justice and that something is *God's mercy*. God backs down not because of *what* the people do, but because of *who* God is.

NARRATOR (2):

But God's decision to spare Nineveh left Jonah angry. His vow in the belly of the fish seems forgotten now. Instead he prayed to God in his anger, saying, "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..." (Jonah 4:1-2 *TIB*)

JONAH:

"I knew that you were a God of tenderness and compassion, slow to anger, rich in kindness, relenting from violence." (Jonah 4:2 *TIB*) Every child of Israel knows that. It's from Exodus 34:6. These words are repeated or alluded to more often than any other verse in our Scriptures. They come from the passage where Moses is up on Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments. The Lord moves past Moses and offers these words as God's own self-description. This is *just who God is*.

AUTHOR:

I don't describe the weather on the day of Jonah's great pout, but let's say it was a clear sunny day. There's not a storm in sight. But as far as Jonah's concerned, he's standing on

"I am God, YHWH, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abundant in kindness and faithfulness."
(Exodus 34:6 *TIB*)

the deck of a ship heaving in the waves. And he wants to be thrown overboard once again.

NARRATOR (1):

Jonah concluded his lament by saying, "Now, YHWH, please take my life! I'd rather be dead than keep on living!" (Jonah 4:3 *TIB*)

AUTHOR:

Why? Why does he want to die? Everything in the story that doesn't make sense is telling you to *look beneath the surface for the real message*. And it starts here. *Jonah would rather be dead than have to share God's compassionate character with the unchosen Assyrians*. If he can't keep God's tenderness, patience, and faithfulness to his own people, then not even the belly of a fish will get him far enough away.

3rd ISAIAH:

No one wants to identify with Jonah at this point in the story. He's being petty and self-centered to a ridiculous extreme. But he's a symbol here for Israel after the Exile — or at least a symbol for the impulse in Israel that wants to say God is for Israelites only. Indeed, *he's a symbol for all of us, whenever we try to narrow God's love down to the people we're comfortable loving*.

AUTHOR:

And because we're so busy laughing at *his* foolishness, the message that we need to hear just might sneak through past our own defenses. Great comedians know this. Whether their routines deal with the absurdities of everyday life or the edgier social issues that make us nervous, if they can get you *laughing* at them, you might suddenly discover that you're laughing at your own foolishness as well. That's what I'm hoping happens here.

NARRATOR (2):

God ends the scene by asking Jonah whether it's right for him to be angry. Jonah sulks off to the edge of the city and finds a place to sit, waiting to see if perhaps God will decide to destroy the city after all. God causes a plant to grow, a bush that rises quickly and offers shade to Jonah's head — and Jonah was pleased with the plant. But then God sends a worm to eat the plant and it withers. And God sends a hot

wind from the east, and a harsh sun, and before long Jonah was faint from the heat. And for the third time in four chapters, he wants to die, saying, I'd rather be dead than keep on living!" (Jonah 4:8 *TIB*)

AUTHOR:

Two words, in case you're tempted to mistake these details for the real message: cartoon action. The plant grows super fast, tall enough and in just the right place to shade Jonah's head – in a single day. And then a worm kills the plant, plus a hot wind comes up and the sun beats down. I don't expect you – I *don't want* you to be reading this like history. I want you to be watching for message beneath these fantastic turns in the plot, like you're waiting for the punch line in a joke.

JONAH:

In the story, I've had it up to here by now. Sent to my enemies. Tossed overboard in a storm. Swallowed – and vomited up – by a fish. Left in the lurch like a laughingstock when God decides to show mercy right after I announce God's impending justice. And now, in the middle of my grand pout, even this little shade plant betrays me. So when God asks if it's right for me to be angry about the plant, I can't imagine what's coming next. I just practically explode at God, "I have every right to be angry, to the point of death!" (Jonah 4:9 *TIB*)

NARRATOR (1):

"God replied, 'You feel sorrow because of a castor plant that cost you no labor, that you did not make grow, that sprouted in a night, and that perished in a night. Is it not right then, for me to feel sorrow about the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than 120,000 people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, to say nothing of all the animals?'" (Jonah 4:10-11 *TIB*)

AUTHOR:

There's the punch line! If Jonah would do anything to save the silly plant that he had nothing to do with, how can he not see that God would do anything – even if it meant changing God's mind and causing a prophet a little embarrassment – to save an entire city? And the little comment about right hands and left hands – that's not a cute way of calling the Ninevites stupid. It's just a way of saying how

unJewish they are: they don't know which hand to use for this or that ritual duty, something that Jonah (and every Jewish child) had started learning even before he could speak. They're not stupid. They're just emphatically *not* part of God's chosen people.

3rd ISAIAH:

But here, in this story, they are chosen to be the recipients of God's mercy. Imagine how that idea sounded in a time when Ezra and Nehemiah were breaking up every inter-racial marriage and driving all the foreign women – and any of their children – out into the wilderness. It's no wonder that the author of this story set it in a different time and told it as a parody. He used the different setting to protect himself from charges of being a traitor. And he used the humor to catch his hearers off guard, to sneak in a word of truth before their defenses shot up.

AUTHOR:

True enough. But not everyone was as cautious as I was. 3rd Isaiah was a real prophet – not a fictional character in a parody – and he wrote these powerful words: "Foreigners who would follow YHWH should not say, 'YHWH will surely exclude me from this people.'" *That was exactly what Ezra and Nehemiah were doing to the foreigners in Israel.* But 3rd Isaiah countered directly, "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)

3rd ISAIAH:

Let me add one last thing, since I obviously don't mince words. The Author has reminded us continuously that in parody the meaning isn't in the details on the surface, it's in the message underneath. Sometimes people will want to say, "Ah, but the Ninevites were wicked and needed to repent." Then they'll use that to exclude from God's mercy and love anyone whom they deem "unrepentant." But that's a detail on the

surface. The message underneath, at the heart of this story, isn't about deciding who's wicked today or who needs to be warned or who needs to repent. *It's about whose God might still be too small.* And that's a message aimed at all of us in every time and place.

JONAH:

Even more than that, it's simply about how big God is. Bigger than any fish in the sea. God swallows whole peoples in God's grace, mercy, and love. And God specializes in "swallowing" the very people we think God shouldn't. That's my fish tale, and I'm sticking to it.

* * *

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

NARRATOR (2):

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) of our faith communities: persons of color, immigrants, LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) persons, people 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 may seem so unchosen, so other to us — speaking as Jonah, the Men on the boat, the King of Nineveh, 3rd Isaiah, the Author, 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 story of Jonah or the challenge faced by the church to widen our welcome today — or both...

1. What insights did you gain from this experience?
1. What challenges or questions did it raise for you?
2. Of the characters in this story (Jonah, the Men on the boat, King of Nineveh, 3rd Isaiah, the Author), where do you see their views or experience reflected in the current church — or in your own life?
3. 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.

Timeline

Understanding the relationship between the story told within the Book of Jonah and the historical setting of the writing of the *Book of Jonah* (likely 200-300 years later).

BCE Timeline

(years before
the Common Era)

Events occurring:

- 1100 BCE** Approximate date for the events in the Book of Ruth.
- 1075-1025 BCE** Ruth gives birth to Obed, who becomes father to Jesse, who becomes father to David.
- 1000 BCE** David becomes king in Israel.
- 922 BCE** Civil War splits Israel into two kingdom: Israel in the North; Judah in the South.
- 750 BCE** ***Approximate date for the events in the Book of Jonah.***
- 722 BCE** The Assyrian Empire conquers and scatters the Northern Kingdom of Israel. During this time the original prophet named Isaiah is active.
- 597-587 BCE** The Babylonian Empire conquers Assyria as well as the Southern Kingdom of Judah and carries these last two tribes of Israel into Exile in Babylon.
- 539 BCE** The Persian Empire conquers Babylon and chooses to allow all the Exiles of Judah to return to the area around Jerusalem. During this time a *second* prophetic voice writes under the name Isaiah; scholars call this voice “Second Isaiah.”
- 520-515 BCE** The Exiles (now free) work to rebuild the Temple.
- 535-435 BCE** During this period (about the first 100 years after the Exile ends) the people of Israel are asking the very tough question, “Why did the national disaster of the Exile happen?”

This is the period when Ezra and Nehemiah forbid inter-marriage (and breaks up existing mixed marriages.)

This is also the era when a *third* prophetic voice writes under the name Isaiah; scholars call this voice “Third Isaiah.” This prophet challenges the viewpoint of Ezra and Nehemiah — *this is the character in the Reader’s Theater.*

And this is the era when many scholars believe that both the Books of Ruth and Jonah were written. If true, these authors chose to write vivid tales about characters in Israel’s past in order to convey their understanding of God and relate it to Israel’s life in the present. The Books of Ruth and Jonah, like the message of Third Isaiah, present an image of a much more inclusive God than is seen in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah.

Thus, the biblical writings (Ezra, Nehemiah, Third Isaiah, Ruth, and Jonah) produced during this last era (535-435 BCE) give us a glimpse into a time when the people of God were actively wrestling with how best to speak about God in light of enormous changes and challenges in the world around them.

The Book of Jonah

Chapter 1

The word of YHWH came to Jonah ben-Amittai:

“Get up! Go to the great city of Nineveh right now. Raise a cry against it! Tell them that I know all about their crimes.”

But Jonah decided to run away from YHWH, and set out for Tarshish instead. He went down to Joppa and found a ship bound for Tarshish. He paid the fare and boarded the ship bound for Tarshish, in order to get away from YHWH.

But YHWH unleashed a violent wind on the sea, and the storm was so great that it threatened to break up the ship. The frightened sailors, every one of them, appealed to their gods. Then they threw the cargo overboard to lighten the ship. Jonah, however, went below, laid down in the hold, and fell fast asleep. The captain found Jonah and said, “How can you sleep at a time like this? Get up! Call on your god! Maybe your god will spare a thought for us, and not leave us to die.”

The crew, meanwhile, said to one another, “Come on, let us cast lots to find out who is responsible for bringing this evil on us.” So they cast lots, and the lot fell to Jonah. So they said to him, “You have brought all this misfortune on us — tell us, what is your business? Where do you come from? What is your country? What is your nationality?”

Jonah said, “I am a Hebrew, and I worship YHWH, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land.”

The sailors were seized with terror at this and said, “What have you done?” They learned that Jonah was trying to escape from YHWH — he told them the whole story.

Then they said, “What are we to do with you, to make

the sea grow calm for us?” For the sea was growing rougher and rougher.

Jonah replied, “Take me and throw me into the sea, and then it will grow calm for you. For I can see it is my fault this violent storm happened to you.”

The sailors rowed vainly in an effort to reach the shore, but the sea grew still rougher for them. Then they called on YHWH and said, “Please, O YHWH, don’t let us perish for taking this person’s life. Don’t hold us guilty of innocent blood; for you, O YHWH, acted as you have thought right.” And taking hold of Jonah they threw him into the sea; and the sea grew calm once more. At this the sailors were seized with dread of YHWH; they offered a sacrifice to YHWH and made their vows.

Chapter 2

Then YHWH sent a huge fish to swallow Jonah, and he remained in the fish’s belly for three days and three nights. From the belly of the fish he prayed to YHWH, his God, and said:

Out of my despair I cried to you
and you answered me.
From the belly of Sheol I cried,
and you heard my voice.
You threw me into the Deep,
into the heart of the sea,
and floods overwhelmed me.
All your waves, your torrents,
washed over me.

And I said, “I am banished from your sight!
Will I ever again look upon your holy Temple?”
The waters surrounded me right by my throat,
the Deep enclosed me;
seaweed was wrapped around my head.
I sank down to the roots of the mountains;
the vaults of the earth closed me in forever.
But you raised my life
back up from the pit, YHWH my God!

As my soul was ebbing away,
I remembered YHWH, my God,
and my prayer came before you
in your holy Temple.
Those who cling to worthless idols
forsake their own well-being.
But I will sacrifice to you
with a song of thanksgiving.
I will fulfill the vow I made.
Deliverance comes from YHWH!
Then God spoke to the fish,
and the fish vomited Jonah onto the shore.

Chapter 3

The word of YHWH came a second time to Jonah:

“Get up! Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach to them as I told you to do.”

Jonah set out and went to Nineveh in obedience to the word of YHWH. Nineveh was a city large beyond compare:

it took three days to cross it. Jonah moved on into the city, making a day’s journey. He proclaimed, “Only forty days more, and Nineveh is going to be destroyed!”

So the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast and dressed in sackcloth, from the greatest to the least. When the news reached the ruler of Nineveh, he rose from his judgment seat, took off his royal robes and dressed in sackcloth, and sat down in ashes. A decree was then proclaimed throughout Nineveh, by decree of the ruler and the ruler’s ministers, as follows:

“Citizens and beasts, herds of flocks, are to taste nothing! You must not eat anything, and you must not drink any water. You must all dress in sackcloth and call on God with all your might; you must all renounce your sinful ways and the evil things you did. Who

knows, maybe God will have a change of mind and relent! Perhaps God’s burning wrath will be withdrawn so that we don’t perish!”

God saw their efforts to renounce their evil behavior. And God relented by not inflicting on them the disaster that threatened them.

Chapter 4

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. Now, YHWH, please take my life! I’d rather be dead than keep on living!”

Then YHWH said, “What gives you the right to be angry?”

Jonah then left the city and sat down to the east of it. There he made a shelter for himself and sat down under the shade to see what would happen to the city. Then YHWH God sent a castor oil plant to grow up over Jonah to shade his head and soothe his indignation. Jonah was delighted with the castor oil plant. But at dawn the next day, God sent a worm to attack the castor oil plant and it withered. And after the sun had risen, God sent a scorching east wind. The sun beat down on Jonah’s head so that he was overcome and begging for death, and said, “I’d rather be dead than keep on living!”

God said to Jonah, “What gives you the right to be upset about the castor plant?”

He replied, “I have every right to be angry, to the point of death!”

God replied, “You feel sorrow because of a castor plant that cost you no labor, that you did not make

grow, that sprouted in a night, and that perished in a night. Is it not right, then, for me to feel sorrow for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than 120,000 people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, to say nothing of all the animals?"

HEARTS UNBOUND

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

by David R. Weiss

3

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

MARK 2:23–3:6 / LUKE 13:10–17

National Gay and Lesbian
Task Force



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Hearts Unbound

by David R. Weiss

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

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

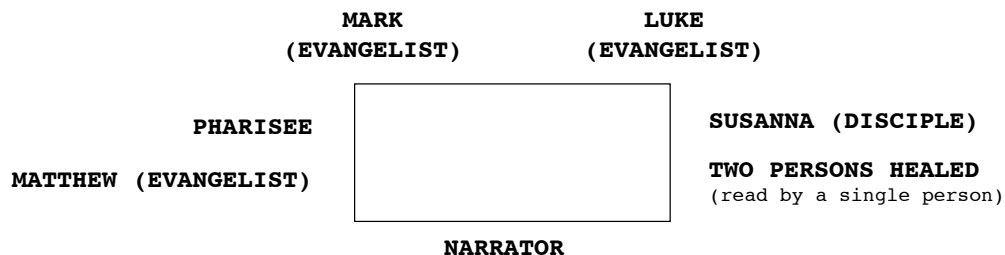
The largest role is the Narrator; the smallest one is the Two Persons Healed. The remaining roles are all about the same. None of the roles are overwhelming; no one speaks more than 10 sentences at a time and most are only 4-5 sentences long. But you may appreciate having the option of choosing a larger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

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

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

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

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



READER'S THEATER SCRIPT**NARRATOR:**

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

MATTHEW:

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

PHARISEE:

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

MARK:

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

LUKE:

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

SUSANNA:

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

TWO PERSONS HEALED:

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

NARRATOR:

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

NARRATOR:

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

MATTHEW:

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

MARK:

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

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

PHARISEE:

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

MATTHEW:

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

MARK:

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

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

MATTHEW:

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

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

NARRATOR:

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

MARK:

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

NARRATOR:

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

SUSANNA:

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

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

NARRATOR:

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

MARK:

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

MATTHEW:

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

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

MARK:

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

SUSANNA:

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

MARK:

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

PHARISEE:

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

SUSANNA:

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

MATTHEW:

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

PHARISEE:

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

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

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

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

NARRATOR:

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

PHARISEE:

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

MARK:

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

SUSANNA:

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

PHARISEE:

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

PERSON HEALED:

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

LUKE:

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

NARRATOR:

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

MARK:

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

PERSON HEALED:

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

PHARISEE:

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

PERSON HEALED:

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

NARRATOR:

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

LUKE:

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

PERSON HEALED:

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

PHARISEE:

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

LUKE:

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

PERSON HEALED:

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

LUKE:

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

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

SUSANNA:

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

LUKE:

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

NARRATOR:

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

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

PERSON HEALED:

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

SUSANNA:

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

* * *

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

NARRATOR:

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

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

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

NARRATOR:

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

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

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

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

HEARTS UNBOUND

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

by David R. Weiss

4

CRUMBS FOR DOGS:
Jesus' Encounter with the Canaanite Woman

MATTHEW 15:21–28

National Gay and Lesbian
Task Force



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Permission is given to download and photocopy this script for use by church or community groups.

Hearts Unbound

by David R. Weiss

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

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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

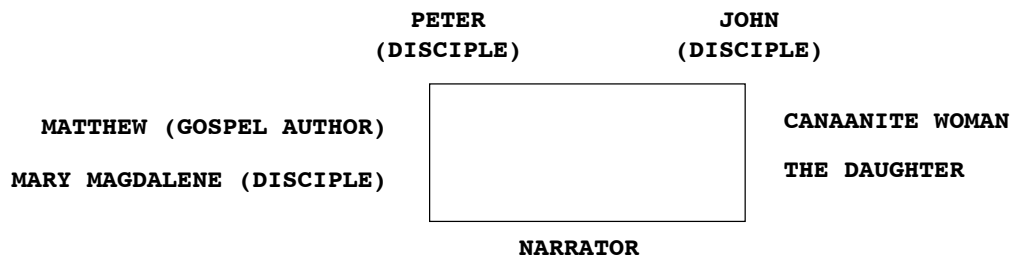
This script invites you to explore a scene in Matthew’s Gospel from the inside, through seven roles created to bring insight to this key passage. These roles are: (1) Matthew, the evangelist, (2) Canaanite woman, (3) the Daughter, (4) Peter, a disciple, (5) Mary Magdalene, a disciple, (6) John, a disciple, and (7) the Narrator. If necessary, to accommodate groups of six or eight, the roles of the Canaanite woman and her daughter can be read by one person, or the Narrator’s role can be shared by two persons.

Mary and Matthew are the largest roles; the smallest roles are the Canaanite woman and her daughter. The remaining roles are all about the same. None of the roles are overwhelming; no one speaks more than 10 sentences at a time and most are only 4-5 sentences long. But you may appreciate having the option of choosing a larger or smaller part overall.

The Narrator will guide you through the scene, reading from Matthew’s Gospel and offering occasional insights. 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 these important texts.

Suggestion: *It will help keep the roles/voices clear for everyone if the Narrator sits at one end of the group, with Matthew and Mary Magdalene to one side and the Canaanite woman and her daughter to the other side. Peter and John 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 a key passage in Matthew's Gospel and to 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.

MARY MAGDALENE:

My name is _____, and I'll be reading the part of **Mary Magdalene**, a female disciple of Jesus. Mary does not appear in Matthew's passage, but as a woman she brings an important perspective to this scene. So the author has introduced her voice into this Reader's Theater.

MATTHEW:

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

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.

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.

CANAANITE WOMAN:

My name is _____, and I'll be reading the part of the **Canaanite woman**, a devoted Gentile (non-Jewish) mother, determined to seek healing for her daughter.

DAUGHTER:

My name is _____, and I'll be reading the part of the Canaanite woman's **Daughter**, a child described as being demon-possessed.

NARRATOR:

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

NARRATOR:

We'll open the conversation by reading the single verse that introduces this scene: "Jesus left there and departed for the district of Tyre and Sidon." (Matthew 15:21 *The Inclusive Bible (TIB)*)

MATTHEW:

There's a lot behind these few words, and it will help us understand what follows if we understand what happened before this. In chapter 12 I wrote that the Pharisees were already plotting to destroy Jesus. And in chapter 14, where I describe the execution of John the Baptist by King Herod, I mention the king's fear that perhaps Jesus was John brought back to life.

JOHN:

In response to this heightened sense of threat, Jesus was putting some distance between himself and the king. Meaning he was also trying to put some distance between himself and the crowds of people that brought him so much attention. He withdrew from his hometown of Nazareth to a lonely place (Matthew 14:13), but the crowds followed him there. So he pulled back even further to Gennesaret (Matthew 14:34), but even there word spread and he found himself surrounded by some persons wanting to be healed and by others wanting to argue.

At this [a Sabbath healing], the Pharisees went outside and began to plot against Jesus to find a way to destroy him. (Matthew 12:14 *TIB*)

At this time, Herod the tetrarch heard about the reputation of Jesus, and he said to his attendants, "This is John the Baptizer, who has risen from the dead. That is why miraculous powers are at work in him." (Matthew 14:1-2 *TIB*)

PETER:

Finally, as if to be sure he found a little peace and quiet, Jesus left Galilee altogether and went all the way north and west to the edge of the Mediterranean Sea. He went beyond the edge of the Jewish world. And that "he" was really "we;" we – who were his disciples – we all went with him. You might say Jesus is "on the run" here. Not that he was scared (though I think some of us were), but he had a sense of timing that told him it was right to lay low for a while. And Tyre and Sidon put him pretty far off the beaten path as far as Jews went.

MARY MAGDALENE:

I don't think any of us were keen to be that far from more familiar landscapes, but we were his "followers," so that's what we did. We each said to Jesus, with our feet if not with our words, something like Ruth's famous promise to Naomi: "Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge." (Ruth 1:16 *TIB*) And so, ironically echoing the faithfulness of a Gentile woman, we disciples followed our Lord into Gentile territory.

MATTHEW:

Here's one last thing to notice. This passage is part of how my own telling of the story of Jesus unfolds. But it's also an important passage for the community that reads my gospel. By the time I wrote – most likely sometime between the years 80 and 85 – Paul's missionary activity had been going strong for thirty years. Even though my readers seem to have been mostly Jews, one of the themes in my gospel is the encounter with the Gentiles. From the Magi who visit Jesus as an infant to the "great commission" to carry the gospel to the ends of the earth, I was trying to persuade my community that the future of our movement lay beyond Judaism. This scene is part of that, too.

NARRATOR:

We continue, reading from Matthew, chapter 15: "It happened that a Canaanite woman living in that area came and cried out to Jesus, 'Heir to the House of David, have pity on me! My daughter is horribly demon-possessed.' But Jesus gave her no word of response." (Matthew 15:22-23a *TIB*)

PETER:

This is exactly *not* the sort of "peace and quiet" Jesus was seeking. I mean, this is *wrong* on so many levels. First, she's a Gentile. Regardless of what Matthew says about the need for his readers to imagine carrying the message about Jesus beyond Judaism, no one is ready for this. When Jesus sent us out on our first missionary journey, his instructions were pretty clear: "Don't visit Gentile regions, and don't enter a Samaritan town. Go instead to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." (Matthew 10:5-6 *TIB*) No offense, but when it comes to the kingdom, Canaanites need not apply.

JOHN:

Second, she's a woman. She wasn't supposed to be speaking to Jesus at all. She should have sent her husband or a son or another male relative. There's a proper way to do these things. And this wasn't it.

PETER:

Third, she's *shouting*. She was an outsider, and doubly so as both a Gentile and a woman. Her place was to be unseen and unheard. I'm sorry, but even a gracious God has limits, right? She was not doing herself any favors by making a scene.

CANAANITE WOMAN:

Making a scene? I'm a mother. For the sake of my daughter I'd make as much of a scene as I had to, to get this man's attention. I'm not Jewish, but I'd heard stories about this man's power. Honestly, I cared less about his God than I did about my suffering child. But if he could help her, I would move heaven and earth to make that happen.

DAUGHTER:

You won't hear me anywhere in this passage. I was the cause of all this fuss, but my name and age remain unknown, and my voice is altogether silent. What does it mean that I was "horribly demon-possessed"? Perhaps I was epileptic, given to seizures that convinced others some unholy force was at work in me. Or maybe I had a personality disorder that produced unpredictable behavior or mood swings. Perhaps I had suffered traumatic abuse of some sort that left my psyche shattered. Any of these could have passed for "demon possession" in my day. Or maybe I was ensnared in truly spiritual forces; I don't mean to dismiss that

possibility. I just want to remind you that *many* things that were not understood were blamed on demons. Perhaps all that matters finally is that I was tormented – and that my mother loved me enough to make a scene for my sake.

MATTHEW:

And, within my gospel, there are a couple of significant things about the scene she is making. If you read my story of Jesus closely, you discover that whenever someone who opposes Jesus speaks to him, they address him as “teacher” or “rabbi.” Only those who turn out to be “true” disciples call him “Lord.” Many of the stories told about Jesus were shaped by oral tradition for three decades or more before being put into ink, and each gospel writer left their mark on the stories they chose to set down. I chose to tell this story in a way that foreshadows this woman’s faithfulness even before I reveal it.*

* This is a rare instance where The Inclusive Bible fails to translate the original Greek into English as faithfully as it might. The Greek literally has the woman say, “Lord [kurie], son of David, have pity on me!” In the translators’ decision to leave out the word “Lord” they also omit the foreshadowing that Matthew is trying to offer his readers.
~DW

JOHN:

She also addresses Jesus as “Son of David.” This is a messianic title. It’s a way of acknowledging that Jesus *is* God’s chosen one. And in the Gospel of Matthew the only people who use this title for Jesus are four blind men (Matthew 9:27, 20:30–31), amazed crowds (Matthew 12:23; 21:9), the children in the temple (Matthew 21:15), and this woman. In other words, no one with “religious authority” ever acknowledges Jesus as Son of David. Only the “nobodies” see the truth of who he is. Maybe this is another case of Matthew’s careful choices as the author. But it might also simply reflect the truth of experience: often those at the edge of power see most clearly where God is at work. Those at the center of power often have vision that’s clouded by a wish for things to remain the same.

MARY MAGDALENE:

This was a hard moment for me. I knew too much about being an “outsider” myself to be comfortable here. In fact, I knew too much about making a scene myself. Tradition says that Jesus freed me of seven demons (Luke 8:2; Mark 16:9). I felt a certain kinship with

this woman and her daughter. And I have to say, I was surprised and unsettled by Jesus' silence. Could this man, who had given me my life back, could he spare no word of good news for this woman?

NARRATOR:

The scene continues to unfold: "The disciples came up and repeatedly said to him, 'Please get rid of her! She keeps calling after us.' Finally Jesus turned to the woman and said, 'My mission is only to the lost sheep of the House of Israel.'" (Matthew 15:23b-34 *TIB*)

PETER:

We'd had enough. I'm not saying we were indifferent to this woman's anguish. We were, after all, proclaiming the good news of God's kingdom. And our message, as John just indicated, resonated most with the "nobodies." Neither the priests nor the Pharisees had much use for our "news." To those in power, our news wasn't especially "good." In fact, it challenged the very dynamics that secured their power. But even with "nobodies," there are only so many you can include. If good news was meant even for Gentiles, well, that would mean *everybody* was eligible.

JOHN:

So we asked Jesus to send her away. See, she wasn't just following us. She was shouting. Again and again. Like we owed her something. Like she knew our God better than we did. We knew full well that Jesus fashioned himself as working to fulfill Isaiah's prophecy, "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 56:8 *TIB*) We'd even heard him say, in response to a foolish charge that he cast out demons by his own demonic power, "Those who are not with me are against me. Those who do not gather with me scatter." (Matthew 12:30 *TIB*) The man took his gathering very seriously. And if he said this woman wasn't on the gathering list, that settled it.

NARRATOR:

But a few commentators have argued that there's actually wordplay going on here. We know that Jesus and his disciples spoke Aramaic, but we never really know the exact Aramaic words that are behind the Greek

that was used to write all four of the Gospels. Some have suggested that behind the disciples' request to "send" her away and Jesus' response that he was "sent" is the same Aramaic verb, in which case Jesus' response might be a sarcastic reply, chastising the disciples for their lack of compassion. As though he's reminding them that he, too, was "sent away." It wouldn't be the first time he found his disciples short on understanding. It's an intriguing argument since we know that Jesus was fond of wordplays, but we'll never know for sure.

MARY MAGDALENE:

In any case, at this point in the story, the effect was the same. This mother was going to be left out. Her daughter was going to be left unhealed. My heart was going to be left... broken.

NARRATOR:

But, as it turns out, Jesus' words *didn't* settle it. The scene wasn't over. In fact, an unexpected turn is about to take place. We continue the scene in Matthew: "She then prostrated herself before him, with the plea, 'Help me, Rabbi!' ** He answered, 'But it isn't right to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.' True, Rabbi," ** she replied, 'but even the dogs get to eat the scraps that fall from the table.'" (Matthew 15:25–27 TIB)

** Here, too, The Inclusive Bible doesn't do justice to Matthew's careful literary intent. The word translated twice as "Rabbi" is actually "Lord" [kurie] in Greek. In fact, the only person who addresses Jesus as "Rabbi" in Matthew's Gospel is Judas — when he betrays Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26:49). This isn't meant as a criticism of The Inclusive Bible, but it does demonstrate the challenge of preserving the full richness of the author's original intent in the midst of making multiple decisions about word choices and shades of meaning. ~DW

MATTHEW:

Something happens between verses 24 and 25, between Jesus' apparent dismissal of the woman and her choice to prostrate herself and beg all the more fervently. There's only the slightest pause, the breath you take after a period before starting a new sentence. And in my gospel that breath is the moment where the Holy Spirit rushes in. "Gospel" means "good news," and in practice it means *astonishingly* good news, news so good that it can't help but catch you off guard. And in this

tiny breath-taking moment everyone – including Jesus – is about to be caught off guard.

PETER:

It certainly caught me off guard. Have you ever tried to tell someone they're not welcome and they just wouldn't take the hint? The moment she knelt down I was sure things were going from bad to worse.

CANAANITE WOMAN:

To this day, I'm not sure what drove me from mere words to my knees. I knew that my place was not in front of Jesus. I knew I wasn't wanted or welcome here. But I also knew that my daughter's only hope was in the rumors I'd heard about this man and his God. So I risked everything for her sake. I bet you'd do as much for your children. So I begged.

MARY MAGDALENE:

I begged, too. Although I said nothing out loud, in my heart I pleaded for the man who had shown mercy to me to do as much for this woman and her child.

JOHN:

But instead he responded with something like a proverb that seemed intended to put an end to her begging. In fact, it was a proverb with a painful edge to it. Building on his last remark about the lost sheep of the House of Israel, in these words Jesus mixed his metaphors: here the "lost sheep" suddenly became "the children" to whom the bread belongs. And the Gentiles – including this woman – were dogs.

MATTHEW:

For Jews, "dog" was a common – and unkind – way of naming the Gentiles. Earlier in my gospel, when Jesus says, "Don't give dogs what is sacred" (Matthew 7:6 *TIB*), he uses a Greek word that means "big dogs" or "wild dogs." Here he uses the Greek word for "little dogs," or more likely "household dogs." But, while some commentators suggest that softens the sting, I don't think so. The proverb speaks about children eating bread, so "household dogs" is the obvious type of dog in that scene. But the point is not whether the dogs are wild or tame, big or small, cute or mangy. The point is that a whole category

of people – Gentiles – were dehumanized in this proverb. They were pictured as *dogs*.

MARY MAGDALENE:

This was almost painful beyond words for me. Can you imagine calling this woman... a bitch? That *is* an English word for a female dog. Because the Greek word here is translated so neutrally as "dog," it's easy to miss that this was *unmistakably a slur*. I'm not going to get into the messy theological question of whether Jesus' response was a "sin." I can assure you that those of us who accompanied him during his ministry didn't even think about questions like that. He was *good* beyond measure, but we never once asked if that meant he was perfect. And I won't let you pretend like this language was either a "test" of her faith or a simple matching of wits. Jesus' ministry had reached a limit here. He had drawn a line and this woman was on the outside.

CANAANITE WOMAN:

I knew this slur. It wasn't the first time I'd been called a dog by a Jew. And truthfully, usually that word was enough to silence and shame me. On any other day I would have slunk back into the shadows where I "belonged." *But not this day*. Two things pushed me forward. First, I simply had nothing left to lose. Having watched my daughter's torment over the years, there was nothing now that could deter me from seeking her well-being. Despair perhaps. Total despair might have stopped me. But the second thing that pushed me forward kept the despair at bay. It was the sheer goodness emanating from this man. It seemed to me in that moment that he had more goodness in him than even he could imagine. I had no doubt there was enough goodness to cover my needs as well. So, I stepped into what should have been an embarrassed silence with an audacious, "Yes, but ..."

JOHN:

I knew what she meant, that Jesus seemed to hold within himself more goodness than he himself could humanly fathom. Was it possible that in this moment an outsider – this woman with no right to speak, no claim to a place in God's family – was she actually pushing Jesus to a deeper understanding of who he was and how big his God was?

MATTHEW:

She was, in fact, inviting Jesus deeper into his own words. In my account of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, "When someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn and offer the other." (Matthew 5:39 *TIB*) The words are probably familiar words to you, but their meaning is probably not. In Jesus' day, a slap on the *right* cheek meant a back-handed slap. It was a gesture with a single purpose: it was a power play to put a person back into their place. Like calling a Gentile woman a dog, it was a way of maintaining power and dismissing another person.

PETER:

When Jesus told us to turn the other cheek, he was telling us to refuse to be dismissed. He was urging us to claim our full humanity in the face of those who wanted to ignore it. See, the other cheek – the *left* cheek – could not be hit with a back-handed slap. That would require the use of the left hand. But the left hand, by unimaginably strong custom and ritual, could not be used in this way. (It was reserved for unclean things, like cleaning yourself after using the toilet.) The left hand *could not* be used to assert one's power. So offering the left cheek *turned the tables*. The left cheek could only be hit by a right-handed fist. And that required the person doing the striking to acknowledge the equality of the other person, and to admit that defense (or even retaliation) would be fair.***

*** Credit for this insight into Jesus' famous words from the Sermon on the Mount goes to Walter Wink, who makes the case for reading each of Jesus' three examples here (turning the other cheek, walking the second mile, and surrendering your cloak) as a call to nonviolent resistance. See Walter Wink, "Jesus' Third Way," in *The Powers That Be: Theology for a New Millennium* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 98-111.

MATTHEW:

This was a brilliant suggestion by Jesus. It offered the throngs of marginal Jews who listened to him with a sincere longing for justice a simple, nonviolent way to claim their dignity as God's children. And this woman's "Yes, but" response did the same thing – this time *to Jesus*. She hadn't heard that sermon, but she brought it to life in this moment. When she replied, "but even the dogs get to eat the scraps that fall from the table," she was turning the other cheek. She

was reminding Jesus that even the dogs are part of the household. Even the dogs deserve the householder's care.

MARY:

I think she was saying even more than this. In her audacity she refused to be a dog. She refused to let others define who she was. Listen, dogs don't talk back. The moment that she challenged Jesus she spoke not as a dog, but as a child of the household. And remember, her daughter was being *tormented*. This was no minor ailment. This wouldn't be resolved by a mere crumb. She seemed to know already that in God's family there are no crumbs – even the scraps are able to become a full meal.

NARRATOR:

This is how the scene concludes: "Jesus then said in reply, 'Woman, you have great faith! Your wish will come to pass.' And that very moment her daughter was healed." (Matthew 15:28 *TIB*)

JOHN:

Everything shifted in the first word Jesus spoke: "Woman." Up until now he hadn't actually addressed her as a person. Up until now she was nothing more than a category: non-Jew, not part of the lost sheep of Israel, Gentile, *dog*. And, more importantly, up until now *everything was the way it was supposed to be*. This was the world as we knew it. The world as it belonged. And in this moment, in this simple word, she becomes a person, a woman, a mother. And in that instant all the divisions and categories that determined where God's family was and was not – all that evaporated in an instant of unexpected grace.

MARY:

I watched the rush of emotions across Jesus' face just before he spoke. They went like this: first surprise, then enlightenment, then joy. It was as though he realized just how far the goodness that was in him could reach – and even he was surprised and overjoyed. I know some people get nervous when I talk like that. Did Jesus really have anything to learn? Well, this is what I think. However you imagine that he was both fully divine and fully human, the human aspect must have been perpetually surprised. To be human in the presence of grace is to be swallowed whole by surprise and joy. For Jesus to be fully human, I have to believe he lived most of his life in that moment. And

in this scene we happen to glimpse that surprise swallowing him along with the rest of us.

CANAANITE WOMAN:

I could barely believe my ears. He spoke... to me. He praised my faith. But my faith had been precisely my refusal to be excluded. My faith had been my annoying persistence in the conviction that I belonged where no one else thought I did. My faith had been my rebellious confidence that there was goodness in him that included me. My faith was that we – he and I – were somehow already in relationship. And when he affirmed that faith as “great” it was as though a new space opened up between us, a space filled with healing energy.

DAUGHTER:

And that space – that recognition of relationship – is where my healing happened. Matthew says I was healed instantly. Perhaps because of what Jesus said to my mother, but I think it was because of what changed *between* Jesus and my mother. I was nowhere in sight, but when Jesus recognized my mother as a person, just as fast as “the lightning flashes in the East and is visible in the West,” (Matthew 24:27 *TIB*) just that quickly the grace that stood between them rippled outward and opened up a new possibility for me. Whatever had trapped me in torment was overwhelmed by the same joy that moved across Jesus’ face. And I was made whole.

MATTHEW:

At the very beginning of my Gospel, in trying to name the mystery of his gracious presence, I suggest that Jesus’ identity is captured in the name, Immanuel, which means “God is with us” (Matthew 1:23 *TIB*). Later on, Jesus declared, “Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there in their midst.” (Matthew 18:20 *TIB*) Now we had to recognize that those “two or three” might even include a Gentile woman... or perhaps persons even more unexpected. My gospel closes with Jesus’ Great Commission. He tells his followers to carry his teachings to all the nations, and assures them, “I am with you always, even until the end of the world!” (Matthew 28:20b *TIB*) That promise *begins here*: God is with us, precisely when we stand in the places no one has dared to stand before.

PETER:

A chapter later in Matthew's Gospel, I make my famous declaration. Jesus asked us who the people were saying that he was. We reported what we heard, that some thought he was John the Baptist, or Elijah or Jeremiah, or one of the other prophets come back to life. Then he asked us who we thought he was, and I replied, "You are the Messiah, the Firstborn of the Living God!" (Matthew 16:16 *TIB*) It would be years before I fully fathomed what that meant. In some ways this woman seemed to know it better than I did. In this scene, as well as later on in the Book of Acts (especially chapters 10 and 15****), I was reminded that being Christ, the Messiah – being God's chosen one – meant exploding the boundaries that kept God reserved for one set of people or off limits to another set. The Living God was still widening the circle. And that, I believe, is the rock on which Jesus hoped to build the church, a truth beyond flesh and blood, but one that has everything to do with how we relate to the flesh and blood people around us.

**** See the Reader's Theater scripts on Acts 10 and Acts 15 for a full exploration of these boundary-exploding events. ~DW

"And you," he said [to the disciples], "who do you say that I am?" "You are the Messiah," Simon Peter answered, "the Firstborn of the Living God!" Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon ben-Jonah! No mere mortal has revealed this to you, but my Abba God in heaven. I also tell you this: your name now is 'Rock,' and on bedrock like this I will build my community, and the jaws of death will not prevail against it." (Matthew 14:1-2 *TIB*)

MARY:

It's strange, because I never saw her face – the daughter's. But near the end of his ministry, Jesus spoke about how we meet him, unsuspecting, in the encounters we have with those in need. He said that the responses we make to those who are hungry or thirsty or naked... or, like this girl, sick and tormented – the responses we make to these people are made to Jesus himself. And now, whenever I hear Matthew's account in which Jesus talks about "the

Then these just will ask, "When did we see you hungry and feed you, or see you thirsty and give you drink? When did we see you as a stranger and invite you in, or clothe you in your nakedness? When did we see you ill or in prison and come to visit you?" The ruler will answer them, "The truth is, every time you did this for the least of my sisters or brothers, you did it for me." (Matthew 25:37-40 *TIB*)

least of these" (Matthew 25:31-45), I see a face that I know is hers. Off limits. Outcast. And now part of my family. *Whose face do you see?*

* * *

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

NARRATOR:

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

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

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

NARRATOR:

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

What insights did you gain from this experience?

1. What challenges or questions did it raise for you?
2. Of the main characters in the script (Matthew, the Canaanite woman, the daughter, Peter, Mary Magdalene, John, and the Narrator) where do you see their views or experience reflected in the current church — or in your own life?
3. 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.

HEARTS UNBOUND

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

by David R. Weiss

5

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

LUKE 10:25–37

National Gay and Lesbian
Task Force



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Permission is given to download and photocopy this script for use by church or community groups.

Hearts Unbound

by David R. Weiss

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

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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

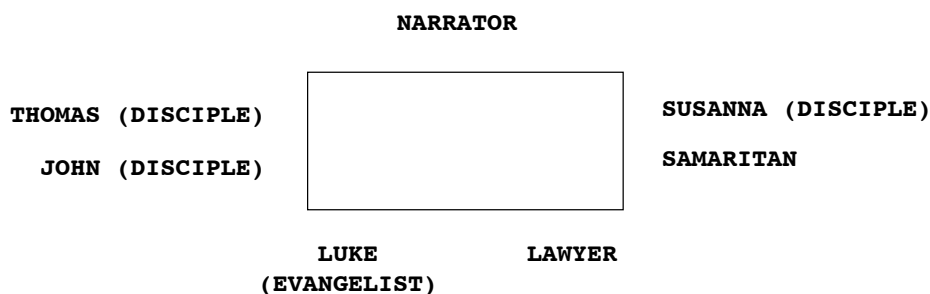
This script invites you to explore this familiar passage from Luke from the inside, through seven roles created to bring insight to this key passage. These roles are: (1) Luke, the evangelist, (2) the Lawyer, (3) Thomas, a disciple, (4) John, a disciple, (5) Susanna, a disciple, (6) Samaritan in the 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.

HEARTS UNBOUND

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

by David R. Weiss

6

BESIDES THOSE ALREADY GATHERED:
Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch

ACTS 8:26–39

National Gay and Lesbian
Task Force



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Permission is given to download and photocopy this script for use by church or community groups.

Hearts Unbound

by David R. Weiss

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

Affirm United/S'affirmer Ensemble
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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.

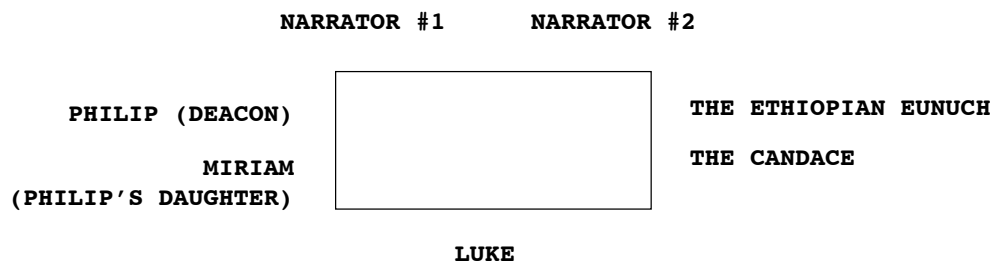
The three largest roles are Luke, Philip, and the Ethiopian eunuch. The roles of each Narrator and Miriam are a bit smaller, and the Candace has the smallest roles. None of the roles are overwhelming; no one speaks more than 10 sentences at a time and most are only 4-5 sentences long. But you may appreciate 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 Summerian 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.

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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Permission is given to download and photocopy this script for use by church or community groups.

Hearts Unbound

by David R. Weiss

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

Affirm United/S'affirmer Ensemble
Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists
Brethren Mennonite Council for LGBT Interests
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Reconciling Ministries Network
Room for All
Welcoming Community Network

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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.

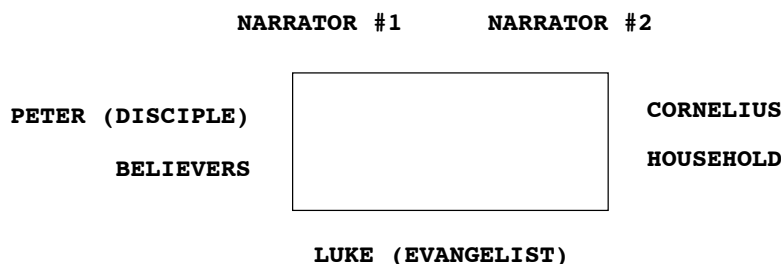
The two largest roles are Peter and Luke, followed by the two roles for Narrators (noted as #1 and #2). The roles of the Believers and Cornelius are a bit smaller yet, and the Household has the smallest role of all. None of the roles are overwhelming; no one speaks more than 10 sentences at a time and 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 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 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.

HEARTS UNBOUND

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

by David R. Weiss

8

SIGNS AND WONDERS:
The Gentiles and the Council of Jerusalem

ACTS 15:1–33

National Gay and Lesbian
Task Force



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Permission is given to download and photocopy this script for use by church or community groups.

Hearts Unbound

by David R. Weiss

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

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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 15 from the inside, through seven roles created to bring insight to this key passage. These roles are: (1) Luke, the evangelist and author of Acts, (2) Paul, an apostle, (3) Barnabas, a missionary, (4) Peter, a disciple, (5) James, a disciple, (6) Silas, a missionary, and (7) the Narrator. The Narrator part can be shared by two persons, or you can combine a couple smaller parts in order to accommodate a group size of either six or eight.

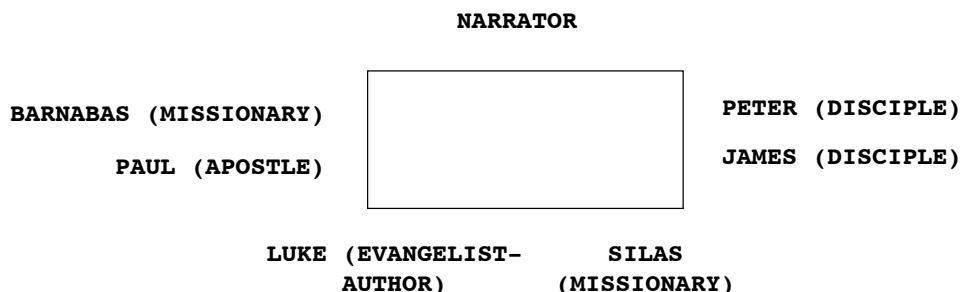
The three largest roles are Paul, James, and the Narrator. The roles of Luke and Barnabas are a bit smaller, and Peter and Silas have the smallest roles. None of the roles are overwhelming; no one speaks more than 10 sentences at a time and most are only 4–5 sentences long. But you may appreciate having the option of choosing a larger or smaller part overall.

(Note: like 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 Narrator will guide you through the scenes, reading from Acts 15 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 Peter and James to one side and Barnabas and Paul to the other side. Luke and Silas 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 Luke's record of the Council of Jerusalem 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.

PAUL:

My name is _____, and I'll be reading the part of **Paul**, the most well-known missionary in the early church. Paul was not one of Jesus' disciples; in fact, he was a devout Jew who initially persecuted the early church. But his life was re-directed after a vision of the risen Jesus in which he was sent to preach to the Gentiles (non-Jews). He became the loudest voice in the early church for their full welcome into the Christian church without needing to become observant Jews first.

BARNABAS:

My name is _____, and I'll be reading the part of **Barnabas**, an early Jewish Christian and a companion of Paul on several missionary journeys.

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.

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.

JAMES:

My name is _____, and I'll be reading the part of **James**, one of the original twelve disciples. James (along with Peter and John) is portrayed in the Gospels as one of the "inner three" disciples and

was regarded as a particularly central leader in the early church.

SILAS:

My name is _____, and I'll be reading the part of **Silas**, one of Paul's missionary companions.

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.

NARRATOR:

The Council of Jerusalem occurred around the year 50, about 20 years after the ministry of Jesus and still quite early in the church's life. Most Christians at this time were still observant Jews, meaning they regarded themselves as Jewish in every sense of the word. And they viewed their commitment to Jesus as the (Jewish) Messiah as an expression of their *Jewish* faith.

LUKE:

Remember, Jesus himself was an observant Jew – as were all his original followers. His occasional departures from the Law (like his choices to heal on the Sabbath or to interact with outcasts) created such a fuss precisely because he was seen, even by his adversaries, as a *faithful* Jew.

NARRATOR:

But as Paul's missionary work extended farther into the Roman Empire, more and more Gentiles became followers of Jesus. This raised the question for which there was *no clear precedent*: does a Gentile need to become *Jewish* in order to follow Jesus? It was clear that if a Gentile converted to Judaism they needed to adopt the observance of the Torah, but... was choosing to follow Jesus the same thing as becoming Jewish? We might easily think, "Of course not!" But, since every original follower of Jesus was Jewish, the answer was not nearly so clear 2,000 years ago.

LUKE:

Lastly, remember that I wrote both my Gospel and Acts around the years

80-85. So I had the benefit of 30-plus years of *historical hindsight*; I knew something of how these issues had played out by the time I related how they began. Of course, I also had the advantage of those same 30-plus years of *theological insight*. In those early years the Spirit's guidance was often as "subtle" as it must seem for you today.

PAUL:

Think about it: just 30-40 years ago some of you were asking whether to ordain women (some of you probably still are). Go back another 20 years before that, and the question of civil rights for African American people divided many churches within themselves. By now the Spirit's leading might seem pretty clear to you on both of those issues, but it wasn't always so clear. So don't underestimate how subtly the Spirit's guidance unfolds in the life of the church. What was true for you 30-50 years ago, was just as true for us 2,000 years ago. And I suspect it's still true on other issues today.

NARRATOR:

Let's begin the passage now. We start at the beginning of chapter 15: "Then some Jewish Christians came down to Antioch and began to teach the believers, 'Unless you follow exactly the traditions of Moses, you cannot be saved.'" (Acts 15:1 *TIB*)

PAUL:

Can you believe this?! I've been carrying the gospel across the Empire for more than a decade. Beginning in synagogues with Jews, but convinced as well that this news was just as good for Gentiles. If we're truly saved by grace, then no matter how important circumcision is to the Jews – I am, after all, Jewish myself – it *cannot* be set up as a requirement for salvation.

BARNABAS:

But these characters from Judea – Jewish Christians from Jerusalem, no doubt – brought words to our churches that were not gospel at all. They sowed doubt in the hearts of those to whom we had preached grace.

JAMES:

I'm the leader of the Jerusalem church. We never "dispatched" those men to go and stir up trouble. We knew Paul's message of a Torah-free

path to salvation was unsettling to many. As Jews, our whole identity as children of God is bound up with the details of the Torah. We didn't see it as a burden put upon us. It was... more like a ritual of courtship between God and us. Not always easy, but in fulfilling each of the 613 commandments in the Torah we *wed ourselves to God*. So we wondered – some of us *anguished* – over how this man, Paul, could be so quick to say “Grace, only grace, only faith, nothing else.” I wasn't surprised to learn that some of our members had gone down to Antioch to challenge his teaching.

NARRATOR:

We continue with the passage: “Paul and Barnabas strongly disagreed with them and hotly debated their position. Finally, it was decided that Paul, Barnabas and some others should go up to see the apostles and elders in Jerusalem about this question. All the members of the church saw them off, and as they made their way through Phoenicia and Samaria, Paul and Barnabas told how the Gentiles had been converted. Their story was received with great joy among the sisters and brothers.” (Acts 15:2-3 *TIB*)

PAUL:

I'll be honest; I was disappointed that the Gentile Christians at Antioch were shaken so quickly in their faith. I said, “I am astonished that you have so soon turned away from the One who called you by the grace of Christ, and have turned to a different gospel – one which is really not ‘good news’ at all. Some who wish to alter the Good News of Christ must have confused you. For if we – or even angels from heaven – should preach to you a different gospel, one not in accord with the gospel we delivered to you, let us – or them – be cursed!”* (Galatians 1:6-8 *TIB*)

*These are Paul's actual words written to the Galatians facing a similar crisis of faith.

BARNABAS:

Luke says we “strongly disagreed with” and “hotly debated” these men – that's for sure! Paul called them “dogs,” “troublemakers,” and “mutilators” (Philippians 3:2 *TIB*). I can still see their eyes widening when he exclaimed, “You're so intent on wielding the knife against these people so new in their faith – how I wish that when you

were being circumcised as babes the knife had *slipped and taken the whole thing off!*"**

PAUL:

Immediately, we resolved to send a delegation, led by Barnabas and myself. We would settle this once and for all. Many in the church, even many of the Jewish believers, were overjoyed at the conversions of the Gentiles. They saw that the hand of God moved mightily across the region.

**Paul's words here are a vivid paraphrase of actual words written to the Galatians when he was battling those in that community who would make circumcision a requirement of Christian faith. He didn't mince words; The Inclusive Bible translates it thus: "And as for those who keep harassing Gentile Christians to submit to the Law and become circumcised: may their knives slip!" (Galatians 5:12 *TIB*)

NARRATOR:

Our passage continues as the delegation reaches Jerusalem: "When Paul's group arrived in Jerusalem, they were welcomed by that church, and by the apostles and the elders, to whom they gave an account of all that God had accomplished through them. Some of the converted Pharisees got up and demanded that such Gentiles be forced to convert to Judaism first, before being baptized, and be told to follow the law of Moses. Accordingly, the apostles and the elders convened to look into the matter." (Acts 15: 4–6 *TIB*)

BARNABAS:

We were excited to share the rich harvest of hearts we had been blessed to receive among the Gentiles. But we were immediately challenged by these Pharisees – as though we were harvesting fruit that wasn't really ripe.

PETER:

Are you surprised that there were *Christian* Pharisees? The earliest Christians came from almost every segment of the Jewish population. As Jews, our hunger for justice and faith and for the Messiah was very real. While Jesus' message resonated most with the peasants, it certainly echoed in the hearts of others as well. Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea were both Pharisees and sympathetic to Jesus. So was Gamaliel, who offered his voice of tolerance for the early Christians before the Jewish council of the Sanhedrin.

PAUL:

I myself was a Pharisee – indeed, near the end of my life, while on trial before Herod Agrippa, I declared not that I “once was,” but that “I *have lived* the life of a Pharisee.” (Acts 26:5 *TIB*)

LUKE:

The Pharisees saw themselves as inheriting the mantle of the prophets. In contrast to the priests, whose “turf” was the Temple, the Pharisees studied the Torah and strove to weave devotion to the Torah into daily life. While some were exceedingly strict, others were both practical and compassionate. Like their contemporary counterparts, rabbis, they were as likely to be warm and wise as to be rigid and legalistic; you can’t paint every Pharisee with the same brush.

Nicodemus appears three times in the Gospel of John (3:1-21; 7:45-52; and 19:38-42). Joseph of Arimathea appears alongside Nicodemus in the Gospel of John (19:38-42) and in the Synoptic Gospels (Mark 15:42-47; Matthew 27:57-61; and Luke 23:50-56). Gamaliel appears in the Book of Acts (5:34-39; 22:5).

JAMES:

But these particular Pharisees, the ones taking issue with Paul and Barnabas here, felt that every follower of Jesus was called to keep the Torah with great care. They took deep offense at Paul’s suggestion otherwise. But Paul was bringing far more Gentile converts to follow Jesus than we were managing to convert from among the Jews. These two branches of the church were on a collision course if we didn’t find a way to reconcile them.

NARRATOR:

Peter’s words to the assembly are the first ones reported, beginning with verse 7: “After much discussion, Peter said to them, ‘Friends, you know that God chose me from your midst a long time ago – so that the Gentiles would hear the message of the Gospel from my lips and believe. God, who can read everyone’s heart, bore witness to this by granting the Holy Spirit to them as the Spirit has been granted to us. God made no distinction, but purified their hearts as well by means of faith. Why, then, do you put God to the test by trying to place on the shoulders of these converts a yoke which neither we nor our ancestors were able to bear? But just as we believe we are saved through the grace of Jesus Christ, so are they.’ At this, the whole assembly fell silent.” (Acts 15:7-12a *TIB*)

PETER:

Remember, I had received the vision of unclean food – food that God declared clean – leading me to go preach to Cornelius, the Gentile. There, with my own eyes and ears, I saw God pour out the Holy Spirit on Cornelius and his entire household – even while they were all uncircumcised and in other ways unobservant of the Torah. Yet God showed me – and all the believers from Joppa who were with me that day – that God can see clean hearts even where we see “unclean” bodies, *and that God’s sight renders the whole person clean.*

The story of Peter’s vision and his subsequent encounter with Cornelius is recorded in Acts 10:1-48 and is the subject of Session 7 in this series.
~DW

PAUL:

I appreciated the forcefulness of Peter’s words. He and I did not always see eye-to-eye on these matters – I remember a particularly painful encounter earlier in Antioch – but on this day his voice was clear: after the ministry and message of Jesus, to set up *anything* as a requirement for salvation was “putting God to the test.”

When Peter came to Antioch, however I [Paul] opposed him to his face, since he was manifestly in the wrong. His custom had been to eat with the Gentiles but, after certain friends of James arrived, he stopped doing this and kept away from them altogether, for fear of the group that insists Gentiles must convert to Judaism first. The other Jews joined him in this hypocrisy, and even Barnabas felt obliged to copy this behavior. When I saw they weren’t respecting the true meaning of the Good News, I said to Peter in front of everyone, “You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not a Jew. So why do you want to make the Gentiles adopt Jewish ways? We know that people aren’t justified by following the Law, but by believing in Jesus Christ.” (Galatians 2:11-14, 16 *TIB*)

JAMES:

I agree, although I wish that Peter had chosen his words a bit more carefully – more for the sake of future Jews than future Gentiles. He almost seems to be saying that the Torah is a yoke even to the Jews. It’s true that some Jews have used it as a “requirement” to be right with God – in the same way that some Christians have made all sorts of “requirements,” misrepresenting the Christian message as being about something other than grace. But it’s equally true that for many

Jews, the Torah *is* a means of grace. It *is* the way they experience the gracious claim of God on their lives.

PAUL:

So *all of us* (as I will argue in my Letters to the Galatians and the Romans) are saved by grace. For Jews that grace is linked to faith in the promise to Abraham in the Torah; for Christians, both Jew and Gentile, that grace is bound up with faith in the promise of Jesus. Truly, "Each one of you is a child of God because of your faith in Christ Jesus. All of you who have been baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. In Christ there is no Jew or Greek, slave or citizen, male or female. All are one in Christ Jesus. Furthermore, if you belong to Christ, you are the offspring of Abraham, which means you inherit all that was promised." (Galatians 26-29 *TIB*)

LUKE:

After Peter was finished speaking, "[The assembly] listened to Barnabas and Paul as they described all the signs and wonders God had worked among the Gentiles through them." (Acts 15:12b *TIB*)

BARNABAS:

"Signs and wonders." Take Peter's vision and his encounter with Cornelius. Multiply that encounter by a hundredfold or more and you begin to glimpse the signs and wonders we've seen. In our travels, we've seen Paul's words take on life. Jew and Greek at worship side by side, praying for one another. Slave and free coming to the Eucharistic meal side by side, with the world's distinctions forgotten in that holy moment. House churches where men and women serve as equal partners in God's new work. Who could have imagined such things?

PAUL:

We witnessed them, again and again. So as we spoke to the elders and apostles we didn't go back to the Torah or even to the prophets. While these texts proclaim a God who does new things, they can hardly describe the "new things" that God *had not yet done* at the time of their writing. I knew the Torah as well as any of those gathered for the assembly, but I knew that the question of welcome to the Gentiles could not be settled by measuring verse against verse, as though the newness of God could be limited to the fixed words on a scroll. No, the

Torah and the prophets point to a God who occasionally leaps *beyond* their pages – a God, “who gathers the diaspora [the “scattered ones”] of Israel” and who promises that “*There are others I will gather besides those already gathered.*” (Isaiah 56:8 TIB)

BARNABAS:

So we didn’t debate circumcision by going to the texts – there *weren’t* any specific texts that we could go to. Instead we told *stories* of *uncircumcised* believers: one after another whose lives so carried the mark of God’s presence that to insist on circumcision would have been – as Peter said – putting God to the test.

JAMES:

I’ll admit it. I would have preferred a *text*. It would’ve made it easier to go to my own kin and show them in black and white where it says this is okay, this is God’s will. But I also have to admit that *in the story the Torah tells* of our life with God we are seldom told in much detail about things around the next corner. Abraham received a promise, but it was *long years* before Isaac was born. Joseph was sold into slavery, and it was years before purpose could be seen in that deed.

PETER:

And while our ancestors showed up in Egypt as Joseph’s honored family, we wound up in bitter bondage as slaves. Later, when Moses led us out of Egypt, it wasn’t long before we started murmuring about the predictability of our life as slaves – as though that could ever be better than the unpredictability of our newfound freedom.

PAUL:

When Joshua was told to lead the wandering Hebrews into the land of Canaan... when David volunteered, as a mere youth, to battle the giant Goliath... when we were first sent into Exile and later brought back to our homeland...

JAMES:

... *There were never any texts to map out our way.* For the first thousand years of our faith we had no written texts at all – only stories told and retold. Only Spirit-filled intuitions leading us along. And even when we had texts to keep us company, their promises boiled down to these two: that God *will be faithful* and that God will be faithful *in surprising ways*. What Paul and Barnabas shared, confirmed this.

NARRATOR:

Then it was James' turn to address the assembly: "When [Paul and Barnabas] finished their presentation, James spoke up. 'Sisters and brothers, listen to me,' he said. 'Simon has told you how God initially became concerned about taking from among the Gentiles a people for God's name. The words of the prophets agree with this, since the scriptures say, "'After that I will return and rebuild the fallen house of David; I will rebuild it from its

"On that day, I will set up again the fallen tent of David. I will mend its tears and restore its ruins, and rebuild it strong as it was in the days of old." (Amos 9:11 *TIB*)

"Who announced this from the beginning, and foretold it from long ago? Was it not I, YHWH? There is no other God but me, a just and saving God — there is none but me. Turn to me and be saved, all of you — even those at the ends of the earth, for I am God." (Isaiah 45:21-22)

ruins and will restore it. Then the rest of humankind, all the Gentiles who are called by my Name will look for God,' says the Most High, who makes these things which were known so long ago." It is my judgment, therefore that we shouldn't make it more difficult for Gentiles who are turning to God. We should merely write to them to abstain from anything polluted by idols, from sexual immorality and from eating meat of unbled or strangled animals. After all, for generations now Moses has been proclaimed in every town and has been read aloud in the synagogues on every Sabbath.'" (Acts 15:13-21 *TIB*)

JAMES:

I found a text! Waiting silently in my heart, I found those words, drawn from Amos and Isaiah. Of course, they don't "prove" anything. Texts rarely do. They don't say *how* Gentiles should seek the Lord. But they reminded all of us that we have long known that God's hope reached beyond our own kin. Much as we have wished at times that only

those *just like us* – only fellow Jews and those willing to live like Jews – were God's chosen people, I reminded my fellow apostles and elders that God has always wished to choose... *everyone*.

LUKE:

I'm careful with my words when I write, and sometimes your English muddies what I tried to keep clear. In my original Greek, James does *not* say (as some of your translations, like the NRSV, render it), "This – (God's reaching out to the Gentiles) – agrees with the words of the prophets." As though God needs the prophets' approval to act. No, the way I wrote it, it says, "The words of the prophets agree with this – (God's reaching out to the Gentiles)." It's a small thing, but it matters. James quotes the prophets not to give God "permission," but to acknowledge that now – thanks to God's new activity – we can see in the text something we couldn't see there before.

JAMES:

See, Peter began the assembly with a bold declaration of God's gracious freedom: that salvation comes as a *free gift*, both to Jews and to Gentiles. Then Paul and Barnabas testified to the gracious freedom of God that they experienced in their mission to the Gentiles. Now, I'm trying to figure out the *practical implications* for this gracious freedom: *how will Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians live together in the new church?*

SILAS:

James is the acknowledged leader of the Jerusalem church. His gift was to hear all sides of an issue and then propose a wise way forward. If you read Luke's entire Book of Acts closely, you'll find that James is the only leader in the early church whose words are never challenged by another person. He didn't speak quickly, so when he did finally speak, his wisdom was evident and respected.

JAMES:

We agreed: no circumcision for the Gentiles. But because we knew that both Jews and Gentiles across the Roman Empire heard the teachings of the Torah regularly in the synagogues, we felt it important to identify the few things that we *would* ask of the Gentiles.

NARRATOR:

We'll hear more about those "few things" in a moment. First, the passages continues: "Then the apostles and elders decided, in agreement with the whole Jerusalem church, to choose delegates to send to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They chose Judas known as Barsabbas and Silas, both leading members of the community. They were to deliver this letter: 'From the apostles and elders, to our Gentile sisters and brothers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia: Greetings! We hear that some of our number, without any instructions from us, have upset you with their discussions and disturbed your peace of mind. Therefore, we have unanimously resolved to choose representatives and send them to you, along with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, who have risked their lives for the name of Jesus Christ. So we are sending you Judas and Silas, who will convey this message by word of mouth: it is the decision of the Holy Spirit, and ours as well, not to lay on you any burden beyond that which is strictly necessary – namely, to abstain from meat sacrificed to idols, from meat of unbled or strangled animals and from fornication. You will be well advised to avoid these things. Farewell.'" (Acts 15:22-29 *TIB*)

SILAS:

Knowing the harm that had been done by those who preceded us in Antioch, it was decided – unanimously – to send more than just a written message. Judas (of course, *not* the man who betrayed Jesus!) and I were honored to be sent. And unanimously? That's virtually unheard of in any church, especially the early church. It shows the earnestness of the leaders to heal this rift before it widened any further.

PAUL:

I was mildly ecstatic. My words to the Gentiles and my calling by Christ were finally being fully confirmed. Did you hear them call me and Barnabas "beloved"? That's not how we often felt in those early years, but perhaps this did signal the start of a new day.

PETER:

The first crucial thing is to notice what's not even mentioned: circumcision. The debate is over. The subject is closed. God's

gracious freedom cannot be hindered by human rites. No further discussion needed. We asked only that the Gentiles "abstain from meat sacrificed to idols, from meat of unbled or strangled animals and from fornication."

JAMES:

Listening in, 2,000 years later, you might think we're sneaking a few "requirements" in on the Gentiles through the back door. But that's not the case. Our stance was clear: salvation comes as a free gift, received through faith, without any other requirement. We were creating a church that would consist not only of Jews, who continued to embrace the Torah as central to their expression of faith, but also Gentiles, for whom the observance of Torah is *not* part of their faith. But these few "essentials" speak to aspects of pagan culture and belief that *do* conflict with Christian faith itself.

BARNABAS:

Idol worship was everywhere in the Roman Empire. Every city had temples to a handful of gods. Most were Roman, but there were temples to foreign cults, too. It was a big Empire, and there was no shortage of gods to be worshipped. In many cases, "worship" involved sacrificing an animal to a god, and often feasting on the meat or drinking the blood in an effort to fully claim the benefit of the sacrifice.

LUKE:

Well, if you're a Gentile Christian and you continue to "hedge your bets" by offering sacrifices to idols and sharing in temple feasts, where is your faith that *all good things* – both in this life and the next – come from God as a free gift? Even Gentiles need to make a clean break with idolatry because idolatry is *unfaith*. It's actively choosing to rest your heart on the false promise of something other than God's grace.

SILAS:

My task as a delegate was to help the Gentiles understand this. So... let me ask you Gentiles a few uncomfortable questions today. Were the clothes you're wearing made in a sweatshop? Was the meat in your freezer factory-farmed? Were the fruits and vegetables you last bought grown and harvested using excessive chemicals and poorly paid

workers? If so, I'd consider them all "things sacrificed to idols." True, you don't have a temple on every corner, but today your market-driven economy itself is like a temple. The drive to produce things as cheaply as possible and to buy as much as possible, without consideration for the toll this takes on your fellow humans, or your animals, or the earth itself... *is idolatry*. Like Luke just said, "It's actively choosing to rest your heart on the false promise of something other than God's grace." Ouch.

LUKE:

And, fornication. The Greek word is *porneia* (the source for your word, "pornography"), and while it can have a pretty wide range of meanings, the best translation for it is *harlotry*. The ancient Israelites used this word to describe the worship of false gods – and also to describe sex with a person to whom you have not pledged your fidelity: in other words, prostitution or adultery. In fact, *that's why it works as a metaphor for idolatry*. We Jews have pledged our fidelity to God; to chase after any other god is harlotry.

PAUL:

Pagan temples often featured "sacred prostitutes" – both men and women available for "temple sex." By "merging" with these prostitutes you could supposedly merge with the temple's god. In these temples harlotry happened both literally and metaphorically all the time.

SILAS:

That might strike you as very strange today, but think about joining in the frenzy of fans at a music concert or an athletic game, or attending a movie packed with heavy doses of graphic violence or exploitive sexuality, or playing a video game in which the goal is to kill as many "enemies" as possible. Those activities all offer vicarious experiences that have the power to shape – or misshape – your deepest values. But many Christians simply see them as part of today's culture, without seeing them as potentially at odds with your faith. Temple prostitutes were deeply embedded in Gentile culture; they could easily be taken for granted. But clearly that, too, would mean "resting their heart on the false promise of something other than God's grace."

JAMES:

So, now you see, these weren't a handful of "requirements" tossed in to satisfy the Jews who had wanted us to require circumcision. They weren't a compromise. Much more importantly, they clarified what was at stake in aligning their faith with Jesus – and the freedom gained by that faith.

NARRATOR:

Luke concludes this passage with these words: "The party left and went down to Antioch, where they called together the whole community and delivered the letter. When it was read, there was great delight at the encouragement it gave them. Judas and Silas, themselves prophets, spoke for a long time, giving encouragement and strength to the sisters and brothers. The two spent some time there, and then returned home bearing greetings of peace from the sisters and brothers to the apostles and elders who sent them." (Acts 15:30-33 *TIB*)

SILAS:

Luke calls me a prophet. He isn't saying that I predicted the future. He means that I was recognized within the early church as someone with the gift to *discern the leading of the Spirit* and the ability to offer "encouragement and strength" to the believers by helping them see the faithfulness of God, even when that faithfulness took new and surprising turns. Here in Antioch I helped the Gentiles see that they were indeed now part of the story of God's widening love – exactly as they were.

LUKE:

The Council of Jerusalem didn't settle everything once and for all. The early church was a work in progress – still is, I'm guessing. But the stories shared by Paul and Barnabas, combined with the strong words of both Peter and James, and, not least, the buffeting winds of the Spirit, all worked together to throw the doors of the church wide open. I wonder if they still are... what do you think?

* * *

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

NARRATOR:

Now I invite us one last time, within our roles, to answer an *unscripted* question (however we choose to) based on what you’ve experienced in this Reader’s Theater. Many persons today find themselves rendered invisible, kept at the edges (or altogether outside) our faith communities: persons of color, immigrants, LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) persons, those struggling with poverty, those with special needs, and more. *If you could say anything to our churches in the 21st century as we wrestle with whether or how to welcome those who, like the Gentiles in the early church, seem so other to us today, speaking as Luke, Paul, Barnabas, Peter, James, Silas, 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 Acts 15 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, Paul, Barnabas, Peter, James, and Silas) 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.

HEARTS UNBOUND

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

by David R. Weiss

9

GRACE AT THE TABLE AND BEYOND:
Paul's Argument for Extravagant Welcome

THE BOOK OF GALATIANS

National Gay and Lesbian
Task Force



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Permission is given to download and photocopy this script for use by church or community groups.

Hearts Unbound

by David R. Weiss

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

Affirm United/S'affirmer Ensemble
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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

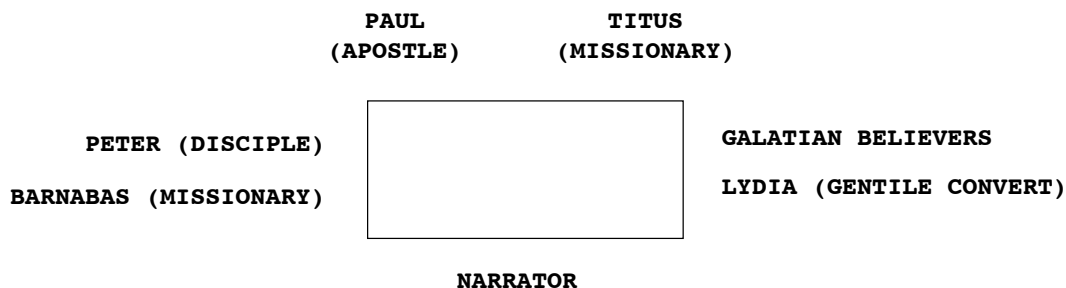
This script invites you to explore a scene in Paul's Letter to the Galatians, from the inside, through seven roles created to bring insight to this key passage. These roles are: (1) Paul, an apostle, (2) Peter, a disciple, (3) Barnabas, a missionary, (4) Titus, a Gentile missionary, (5) Galatian believers, (6) Lydia, a Gentile convert, and (7) the Narrator. If necessary, to accommodate groups of six or eight, the roles of Peter and the Galatian believers can be read by one person, or the Narrator's role can be shared by two persons.

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

The Narrator will guide you through the scenes, reading from Galatians and other texts to begin each brief conversation and offering occasional insights. 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 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 these important texts.

Suggestion: It will help keep the roles/voices clear for everyone if the Narrator sits at one end of the group, with Peter and Barnabas to one side and Lydia and the Galatian believers to the other side. Paul and Titus might sit opposite the Narrator. You might also consider making large name places to put in front of people to identify their role.



READER'S THEATER SCRIPT**NARRATOR:**

Our task is to revisit several key passages in Paul's Letter to the Galatians and to reflect on them from the perspective of the original participants. Let's begin by going around the table to introduce ourselves by our real names and then also by the roles we'll be reading.

BARNABAS:

My name is _____, and I'll be reading the part of **Barnabas**, an early Jewish Christian and a companion of Paul on several missionary journeys.

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 (non-Jews).

PAUL:

My name is _____, and I'll be reading the part of **Paul**, the most well-known missionary in the early church. Paul was not one of Jesus' disciples; in fact, he was a devout Jew who initially persecuted the early church. But his life was re-directed after a vision of the risen Jesus in which he was sent to preach to the Gentiles. He became the loudest voice in the early church for their full welcome into the Christian church without needing to become observant Jews first.

TITUS:

My name is _____, and I'll be reading the part of **Titus**, an early Gentile convert to Christianity and a companion of Paul on several missionary journeys.

GALATIAN BELIEVERS:

My name is _____, and I'll be reading the part of the **Galatians**, a group of Gentile believers. The Galatians were converted to Christianity by Paul himself, but they later had doubts about whether they also needed to become observant Jews in order to receive

God's grace.

LYDIA:

My name is _____, and I'll be reading the part of **Lydia**, a Gentile woman converted by Paul in Acts 16. Lydia is *not* part of the Galatian community. Although her character is based on a person who does appear in the Book of Acts, her voice is brought into this Reader's Theater by the author's imagination, not by history. Her character will add insight into this text from her own perspective.

NARRATOR:

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

NARRATOR:

We'll open the conversation by reading from the start of the Letter to the Galatians: "I am astonished that you have so soon turned away from the One who called you by the grace of Christ, and have turned to a different gospel – one which is really not 'good news' at all. Some who wish to alter the Good News of Christ must have confused you. For if we – or even angels from heaven – should preach to you a different gospel, one not in accord with the gospel we delivered to you, let us – or them – be cursed! We've said it before and I'll say it again: if any preach a gospel to you that is contrary to the one you received, let them be cursed!" (Galatians 1:6-9 *TIB*)

PAUL:

Can you tell I'm a little upset? Let me explain. A lot of people think it was just about the preparation of food and the practice of circumcision. Or just about certain *rules*. But it was about much more than that. It was about *grace*. It was about the very foundation of our life in Christ. It touched *everything*. That's why it mattered so much. That's why I got so angry. And, honestly, at times this confusion seemed to be everywhere in the early church.

GALATIAN BELIEVERS:

Well, this was the confusion in Galatia. Paul had come preaching a gospel of full freedom to us. He told us how, in Jesus, human beings were offered new life. He said that our relationship with God – and also with each other – could be fundamentally transformed. And that this came from God through Jesus – *as pure gift*. It was *grace*, received in *faith*. And as we believed, this grace re-shaped the whole way we lived our lives. We moved with deeper joy and trust. We seemed to live in a deeper reality right here and now... until –

PAUL:

Until, certain persons arrived after I left. They came claiming to be followers of Jesus, but they told the Galatians that to be truly “right with God” they needed *more* than just faith. As if that were possible! As if faith itself weren’t everything!

GALATIAN BELIEVERS:

They told us that we needed to observe the Jewish laws to really follow Jesus. After all, Jesus was Jewish. They spoke with authority. And we began to wonder if we had believed Paul too quickly. Our meals became occasions for anxiety. Were we eating ourselves away from God? Our faith faltered. And the circumcision question was especially troubling.

BARNABAS:

Circumcision was at the center of it. Even more than the Jewish food laws, ever since Abraham, circumcision was seen by Jews as the primary sign of the promise God made to them. Every Jewish male was circumcised. Without exception. And any Gentiles who desired to fully embrace the Jewish faith had to become circumcised themselves. Remember, this letter to the Galatians was written only 20-25 years after Jesus’ ministry. Many people still regarded Jesus’ followers as pursuing another way of being Jewish. There were Pharisees and Sadducees and Essenes and a host of other Jewish sects. There were *many* ways of being Jewish – but all of them involved being circumcised. It only made sense that anyone following the teaching of Jesus would need to be circumcised, too.

PAUL:

It only made sense if you ignored the revelation that was bound up *with* Jesus. That's why I wrote to the Galatians to remind them of the gospel I had proclaimed in their midst just a few years earlier.

NARRATOR:

These are Paul's words in the third chapter of his letter to the Galatians: "Each one of you is a child of God because of your faith in Christ Jesus. All of you who have been baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. In Christ there is no Jew or Greek, slave or citizen, male or female. All are one in Christ Jesus. Furthermore, if you belong to Christ, you are the offspring of Abraham, which means you inherit all that was promised." (Galatians 3:26-29 TIB)

PAUL:

For Gentiles it didn't begin with circumcision but with baptism. When they were baptized into Christ *that* was their sign of the promise made by God to them. And before you think that this was a little too easy for them, consider what was involved.

TITUS:

Let me explain. I'm an uncircumcised Gentile. Now, nobody enjoyed getting circumcised — especially not as an adult. But listen to what *baptism* meant for me. As a Gentile I grew up in a world marked by hierarchy. Your nationality, combined with your status as slave or free, rich or poor, male or female, gave you a place in a complex pecking order in Roman society. It was a world where everything had its place in a pyramid of power. I counted on all of these social labels to tell me who had the most status and power, and who had the least — to whom I owed respect, and from whom I could demand respect. My whole worldview was shaped by these power relationships. But baptism *changed everything*. To have all these status markers washed away in baptism was a much bigger deal than losing my foreskin. It cost me my privilege.... But it gave me my life.

LYDIA:

That's just as true for women. Paul's vision of life in Christ gave us

a new dignity, but it challenged us to be more than we had ever been. He wasn't dreaming. He knew that the church was made up of different people. There still were Jews and Greeks. There still were slaves and free. And there still were men and women. But his claim was that after baptism – because those differences made no difference to God – they no longer had any power to distort our relationships with one another. We were all still different. But we were freed from the way those differences divided us, and we were freed to serve one another in love.

PAUL:

That's what was at stake here. The very shape of our life together in Christ. Because, *if* the food we ate – or the foreskins we cut off – gave us a higher place before God, then grace – the free gift of God's love for us – wasn't really grace after all. And then sooner or later all of our relationships with one another would be distorted by power and status all over again.

BARNABAS:

We had battled this before. In Antioch our work had been undone when some Jewish believers came down from Jerusalem and began telling the Gentiles that they weren't real believers unless they changed their whole lifestyle. Like the Galatians, they were told they needed not only to start following a Jewish diet, but also to get circumcised.

TITUS:

Paul was furious then, too. Paul and Barnabas led a small delegation to Jerusalem, and I went, too. As a Gentile believer, I had a lot at stake in whether the larger church would confirm Paul's message. In writing to the Galatians, Paul described that earlier meeting in Jerusalem. He explained that he set out before the leaders in Jerusalem exactly what he was preaching in order "to make sure that the course I was pursuing, or had pursued, was not useless." (Galatians 2:2b *TIB*) He wanted the Galatians to know he had fought for – and won – the blessing of the church for his message of good news. He assured them that "recognizing the grace that had been given to me, James, Peter and John – these leaders, these pillars – shook hands with Barnabas and me as a sign of partnership: we were to go to the Gentiles and they to the Jews." (Galatians 2:9 *TIB*)

BARNABAS :

This meeting, known later as the Council of Jerusalem, is described by Paul here and later by Luke in the Book of Acts* (chapter 15). It was apparently the first attempt by the early church, around the year 50, to reach an "official" decision about Paul's declaration of extravagant welcome to the Gentiles. Although Paul says that Peter, James, and John all endorse his mission, and Luke has both Peter and James speak eloquently on behalf of welcome to Gentiles, it would be years before all the controversy regarding the unconditional welcome to Gentiles subsided. And Paul would remain at the center – of both the welcome and the controversy.

*Session 8
in this series
explores the
Council of
Jerusalem.

TITUS :

In fact, the church at Jerusalem sent both a letter and two emissaries (Judas and Silas) back to Antioch with the original delegation to confirm that Paul's proclamation was valid. But not long afterwards, trouble found its way to Antioch again. Paul reports this incident to the Galatians as well, perhaps to show that he was ready to oppose anyone who hedged on the absoluteness of grace and faith – even Peter himself.

Then the apostles and elders decided, in agreement with the whole Jerusalem church, to choose delegates to send to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They chose Judas known as Barsabbas and Silas, both leading members of the community. They were to deliver this letter: "From the apostles and elders, to our Gentile sisters and brothers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia: Greetings! We hear that some of our number, without any instructions from us, have upset you with their discussions and disturbed your peace of mind. Therefore, we have unanimously resolved to choose representatives and send them to you, along with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, who have risked their lives for the name of Jesus Christ. So we are sending you Judas and Silas, who will convey this message by word of mouth." (Acts 15:22-27 *TIB*)

NARRATOR :

We read Paul's record of these in Galatians, chapter 2: "When Peter came to Antioch, however, I opposed him to his face, since he was manifestly in the wrong. His custom had been to eat with the Gentiles but, after certain friends of James arrived, he stopped doing this and kept away from them altogether, for fear of the group that insists Gentiles must convert to Judaism first. The other Jews joined him in

this hypocrisy, and even Barnabas felt obliged to copy this behavior. When I saw they weren't respecting the true meaning of the Good News, I said to Peter in front of everyone, 'You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not a Jew. So why do you want to make the Gentiles adopt Jewish ways? Though we're Jewish by nature and not Gentile "sinners," we know that people aren't justified by following the Law, but by believing in Jesus Christ.'" (Galatians 2:11-16 *TIB*)

PETER:

Those of you who know me, know that this wasn't the first time my actions fell short of my ideals. I'd been eager to walk on water, but I quickly sank. I'd been certain that of all the disciples, I would be at Christ's side until the end, but I denied him at the fireside only hours after my boasting. And in the Book of Acts (chapter 10), even before the Council of Jerusalem, I had received the vision of unclean foods – declared clean by God. I realized the foods were a metaphor for the Gentiles and that God was declaring the Gentiles "clean" – acceptable just as they were. I had a role in welcoming the first Gentiles into the church.

Peter spoke up and said, "If it is really you, tell me to come to you across the water." "Come!" Jesus said. So Peter got out of the boat and began to walk on the water toward Jesus. But when he saw how strong the wind was, he became frightened. He began to sink, and cried out, "Save me!" Jesus immediately stretched out his hand and caught Peter. "You have so little faith!" Jesus said to him. "Why did you doubt?" (Matthew 14:28-31 *TIB*)

The accounts of Peter's boasting and denial are found in Matthew 26:30-35, 69-75, with parallels in Mark and Luke.

Peter's vision of forbidden foods and subsequent encounter with Cornelius in Acts 10 is the subject of Session 7 in this series.

NARRATOR:

Following his vision, Peter was asked to go visit Cornelius, a Gentile. He went and preached the good news about Jesus to Cornelius and his entire household. As he finished speaking, the Holy Spirit was poured out upon all of them, both the circumcised believers who

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. (Acts 10:44-45 *TIB*)

had come with Peter — and also upon Cornelius and his household.

PETER:

These people weren't Jews. They ate unclean foods. They weren't circumcised. And yet the Holy Spirit was poured out upon them! It was as though God had ushered them into "my" church and announced, "These folks are with me." I immediately directed the believers with me to baptize them. Afterwards we stayed on for several days, teaching them more about Jesus and being amazed to find ourselves having *fellowship* with persons we once thought were forbidden to us.

NARRATOR:

But the church back in Jerusalem was not so quickly amazed, as we hear in Acts, chapter 11: "The apostles and the community in Judea heard that Gentiles, too, had accepted the word of God. As a result, when Peter went up to Jerusalem, some of the Jewish believers took issue with him. 'So you have been visiting the Gentiles and eating with them, have you?' they said." (Acts 11:1-3 *TIB*)

PETER:

I responded to their question by telling them again everything that had happened. In fact, the way Luke records it in the Book of Acts, my response in chapter 11 (Acts 11:4-17) repeats most of what he had just described in chapter 10 because he wants to make sure that none of his readers missed it the first time. And it's pretty clear: the issue is about food... and foreskins. It's about the type of people you eat with, and the type of food you're likely to eat with them. Well, after I explained my vision and my experience with Cornelius, Luke wrote that their criticism was silenced and they began to praise God. So, you see, I *knew* about God's welcome to the Gentiles. *I was part of it.* When I first went to Antioch, I didn't hesitate to join the Gentiles at their table. But... later on, when others from Jerusalem came, I felt their watchful eyes on my every move. I knew they had misgivings about our table fellowship, and, yes, I drew back.

PAUL:

In Antioch it wasn't just about the food either. I refer to these folks from Jerusalem as the circumcision faction or party (literally, "those of the circumcision") in Galatians 2:12. But even beyond circumcision,

it was about what it took to be good enough, holy enough, for God. It was about what the Gentiles supposedly needed to do before or after "faith" in order to make sure that grace would cover them as well.

BARNABAS:

And about how separate we Jews needed to keep ourselves to make sure that our holiness, our chosen-ness, our grace, wasn't spoiled by them. I admit, when Peter drew back, it shook even me. I had worked alongside Paul for years, but Peter was one of the Twelve. In many ways he was *first* among the Twelve. It seemed best to play it safe.

PAUL:

How do you "play it safe" with the truth of the gospel?! I'm far from perfect myself, but I knew that on this point, either I insisted that faith was all that was needed – or we lost everything. The gospel of Jesus Christ hung in the balance, and while I had no desire to confront Peter, there was too much at stake to be silent. So I asked him, "How is it that just a few days ago you were living like a Gentile – eating at their tables? And now all of a sudden your own actions suggest that they must become like you in order to be full members of the family of God? How does that work?"

TITUS:

You might have noticed above that Paul also said he and Peter were both "Jewish by nature and not Gentile 'sinners.'" (Galatians 2:16) That's what I am: a Gentile "sinner." But this is important to understand: he calls us "sinners" not because of what we've *done* but because of who we *were*. From a Jewish perspective, simply to be a Gentile meant that we were somehow unclean, unfit for good company, unable to be near to God. We hadn't *done* anything, there was just something *queer* about us. And Paul's point is that even he and Peter, who were not "sinners" in the way we were, even they knew that their rightness with God didn't rest on anything they did. It rested entirely on their faith in Jesus. Paul was reminding Peter that both Jews and Gentiles received God's grace as sheer gift.

NARRATOR:

Having been down this road before, Paul was exasperated with the Galatians themselves, and it showed in his tone. He writes in chapter 3, verses 1-3: "You foolish Galatians! Who has cast a spell over you, in spite of the clear and public portrayal you have had of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ? Let me ask you one question: was it because you practiced the Law that you received the Holy Spirit or because you believed what was preached to you? Are you so foolish that, having begun by the Spirit, you would now try to finish with human effort?" (Galatians 3:1-3 *TIB*)

PAUL:

Of course, they hadn't seen Jesus crucified, but I had come *preaching* Christ crucified, and that was how their faith began. They had heard from the very start that Jesus had staked everything – even his life – on the absolute graciousness of God. Like Cornelius and his household, like the believers in Antioch, they had already heard the gospel and believed, and through their belief they had received the Spirit. Someone must have bewitched them to convince them that yet more was required. *They already knew otherwise. They had already experienced otherwise.* And yet now they were being tempted to think that what we humans do – "the flesh" as I call it – can somehow add something to God's grace.

As for myself, sisters and brothers, when I came to you I did not come proclaiming God's testimony with any particular eloquence or wisdom. No, I determined that while I was with you I would know nothing but Jesus Christ – Christ crucified. (1 Corinthians 2:1-2 *TIB*)

TITUS:

Paul didn't mince words when it came to his opponents, either. Of those who were doing the tempting, he exclaimed, "May their knives slip!" (Galatians 5:12b *TIB*). Some commentators think this suggests that Paul's opponents in Galatia were not Jewish believers, but Gentiles like me, though these were Gentile men who had agreed to get circumcised and who were now insisting that other men submit to the same ritual. Paul's language here could be read to say, "I wish when they were being circumcised, the knife had slipped and cut everything off!" It's a pretty strong image, but for Paul, if circumcision won the day, then grace was lost altogether. The stakes were high enough to

require strong language.

NARRATOR:

Paul implored them to remember what they once knew. These are some of his words from chapter 5 and chapter 6 of his Letter to the Galatians: "When Christ freed us, we were meant to remain free. Stand firm, therefore, and don't submit to the yoke of slavery a second time! Pay close attention to me – Paul – when I tell you that if you let yourself be subjected to the Law, Christ will be of no use to you!... In Christ Jesus neither adherence to the Law nor disregard of it counts for anything – only faith, which expresses itself through love... My sisters and brothers, you were called to freedom... [so] serve one another in works of love, since the whole of the Law is summarized in a single command: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'... It means nothing whether one bothers with the externals of religion or not. All that matters is that one is created anew." (Galatians 5:1-2, 6, 13; 6:15 TIB)

GALATIAN BELIEVERS:

We were torn. Like Titus explained earlier, all of us were born into a Roman society where each person was "more than" or "less than" the people around them. Our dealings with everyone were defined by status. Sure, we heard Paul's message of grace, and it was appealing – in an unfamiliar, disorienting sort of way. And when those Jewish Christians arrived from Jerusalem with their insistence that only circumcision and full obedience to the rest of the Law could make us "complete" Christians, it was easy to be swayed by their words. Nobody wants to believe they're "less than" or deficient somehow. But, we were raised in a society that trained us to believe people have different levels of value. In that sense, the circumcision faction's message, though not such "Good News" to us, was at least familiar. We spoke that language in our earlier lives.

PAUL:

For my part, I was convinced that in Christ a new creation *had begun*, one in which neither foods nor foreskins meant anything. I was convinced that in Christ, neither nationality nor wealth nor status had to divide us. I was convinced that in Christ we had been set free for love. I had seen the first fruits of this in Galatia a couple years

earlier.

BARNABAS :

And Paul was determined to see the full harvest ripen. But he didn't expect it to "just happen." He knew that, just as food laws and the rite of circumcision had profoundly shaped the identity of the Jews, other rites would shape the Christian community in equally profound ways. That's why baptism and the Lord's Supper were at the heart of Paul's theology – and why he placed them at the heart of his churches.

PAUL :

Remember where we started? I told the Galatians that in baptism they clothed themselves with Christ. Their relationship to God was determined entirely by being clothed with Christ. And, in the same way, their relationship to one another was determined entirely by being clothed with Christ. So baptism was completely personal, because for each person – one by one – it affirmed them as children of God. And yet it was also completely communal because if each person was a child of God then all were equally members of God's family and brothers and sisters to one another.

BARNABAS :

In a world where both beliefs and practices reinforced divisions, Christian baptism made us one body, not by erasing our differences but by erasing the different values the world put on them. When Paul likened the church to the body with its many members (1 Corinthians 12:12-30), he was saying that every gift, every difference, helps make the community whole.

TITUS :

Elsewhere Paul said that being in Christ gave each of us "free speech." This word, often translated "acting with boldness," actually named the singular right of free speech enjoyed only by free males citizens of the empire. It was a word that was unmistakable in its meaning, especially for those of us who were Gentiles. Forbidden

With such hope we are very bold in what we say. (2 Corinthians 3:12 *TIB*)

The word translated here as "bold" is, *parresia*. The sense of it as "free speech" comes from Prof. David Fredrickson. See "Free Speech in Pauline Political Theology," *Word & World*, 12:4 (1992), pp. 345-351.

to women, aliens, and slaves, *parresia* – free speech – was the cherished privilege to join the conversation that shaped the life of the community. Every Gentile who heard Paul's words knew that when he said free speech belonged to everyone who was in Christ, he meant that baptism made us members of a community where every voice mattered because in this community everyone was a citizen.

LYDIA:

This is where I come in. I'm not from either Antioch nor Galatia. I have no obvious place in this passage, but I am one of the few women named in the early church – and a Gentile woman at that. And, for me, Paul's conviction that the Christian church was not simply a Sunday morning worship experience but a whole new way of *being in community* made all the difference. Luke writes, "Christ opened (my) heart to accept what Paul was saying." (Acts 16:14b *TIB*) And what Paul was saying was not just about my place in the world to come, but also about my place – and all of our places – in the world coming to be here and now. I was eager to hear *that*.

NARRATOR:

The Book of Acts speaks of "Lydia, a devout woman" (Acts 16:14a *TIB*), which indicates she was a Gentile woman who already honored God by respecting Jewish tradition to some extent. She is described as being "from the town of Thyatira" and being "in the purple-dye trade." (Acts 16:14a *TIB*) Because purple cloth was produced using an expensive dye extracted from sea snails and was available only to the elite, commentators have traditionally assumed that Lydia herself was a wealthy merchant.

LYDIA:

But here is one place where the distance between your world and mine becomes clear – and a place where Paul's promise that every voice matters mean so much. My name, Lydia, is not a typical Greek personal name. In fact, it comes from a place named Lydia – and usually only slaves were named after places. Literally, my name means simply, "the woman from Lydia," and there were doubtless many slaves whose identity in the Roman world was simply that: the woman from Lydia. They had no recognition, no status, no voice, beyond that nameless name.

NARRATOR:

It turns out there were two sources of purple dye in the ancient world. Besides the expensive dye made from snails, there was another source: the root of the madder plant, a river plant common in the region of Thyatira. This plant-based dye produced a cheaper purple cloth, a bit like the “knock-off” brands available today that imitate designer lines of clothing. Making dye from these plants was a hard and dirty process – not unlike your sweatshops today. In fact, extracting the dye and treating the cloth, a process that used animal urine, was so foul smelling that dye-workers were only allowed to work outside the city limits... which is exactly where Paul met Lydia: “along the river outside the gates” of the city (Acts 16:13 *TIB*).

In addition to the scholarly sources cited below, my imaginative direction for Lydia in this script was sparked by a reflection on the website Alabaster Jars (www.alabaster-jars.com/biblewomen-l.html) and a Bible Study on Lydia found on the website for the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (www.warc.ch/dp/bs37/07.html).

The prevailing view among commentators is still to regard Lydia as a woman of means, because of her association with purple dye and/or cloth. But, given that this Reader's Theater series is intended to help us hear voices in fresh ways, I've given Lydia a voice seldom heard, but with some scholarly support. ~DW

On the possibility of her low status and on the unattractive aspects of the purple dye trade, see:

Lynn H. Cohick, *Women in the World of Earliest Christians: illuminating ancient ways of life*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic), 188.

Ivoni Richter Reimer, *Women in the Acts of the Apostles: A Feminist Liberation Perspective* [trans. Linda M. Maloney (Minneapolis: Fortress Press), 1995], 98-105.

Richard L. Rohrbaugh, “The Pre-Industrial City in Luke-Acts: Urban Social Relations,” in Jerome Neyrey (ed.), *The Social World of Luke-Acts: Models for Interpretation* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), pp. 125-49, esp. 133-37.

Luise Schottroff, “Lydia: A New Quality of Power” in *Let the Oppressed Go Free: Feminist Perspectives on the New Testament* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993), 131-137.

F. Scott Spencer, *Acts (Readings: a new commentary)* Sheffield Academic Press, 1997, 165.

F. Scott Spencer, “Women of ‘the Cloth’ in Acts: Sewing the Word” in *Dancing Girls, Loose Ladies, And Women Of The Cloth: The Women In Jesus’ Life* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 166-191.

LYDIA:

Thyatira, the region I came from, was famous for its many guilds of artisans – and for using slave labor to produce cheap purple cloth. Many slaves, if they were lucky enough to gain their freedom, continued to use their trade skills to eke out a living.

NARRATOR:

In fact, there were groups of former slaves trained as dye-workers who would travel around working “in the purple-dye trade” together, like a band of migrant workers moving through the countryside. Trained within a guild system, and united by their common skill – and their common past as slaves – they set up their own “houses.” We will never know for sure, but as we seek to understand that distant world on its own terms, it seems likely that Lydia was a former slave, nameless beyond the region in which she was once owned, now living within a “household” of former slaves. She was perhaps a leader within that household, but it was quite possibly a household of marginalized persons, still living at the margins of the city, still carrying on their bodies, from elbows to fingertips the smell of the marginal status that never quite got washed away.

LYDIA:

But listen, in Paul’s words, we heard about a washing that *did* wash away the scorn that marked our past – and present – lifestyle. We were a household of nobodies, but clothed in Christ, we were *each* a child of God. Having learned to live in our own household, Paul invited us to imagine ourselves as part of God’s household, linked to Christians everywhere. We were persons denied both a name and a voice for all of our lives. Now, in baptism, we received a citizenship we could barely imagine! Often in the early church the gift of speaking in tongues was seen as the sign of the Spirit’s presence. But for us, the fact that we were now given the chance to speak at all, using our own words in our native tongues – this was more miracle than we had dreamed of.

BARNABAS:

The Last Supper was another ritual where Paul saw the gospel *happening* – and not just to individuals, but to the whole gathered community. It was a holy moment when the vision of Christian community found in his

Letter to the Galatians came to life. People heard the story of Jesus and tasted for themselves the astonishing grace of God. They practiced the unity that Paul preached.... Or, if they didn't, he exploded as fiercely as he had to the Galatians.

NARRATOR:

This passage comes from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians and concerns reports he has received about their practice of the Lord's Supper: "What I now have to say is not said in praise. Your meetings do more harm than good. In the first place, I hear that when you gather for a meeting there are divisions among you, and I'm inclined to believe it. No doubt there have to be factions among you, to distinguish those who are to be trusted from those who aren't. The point is, when you hold your agape meals, it is not the Eucharist you've been commemorating, for as you eat, each of you goes ahead without waiting for anyone else. One remains hungry while another gets drunk. Don't you have homes where you can eat and drink? Surely you have enough respect for the community of God not to embarrass the poor people! What can I say to you? You'll get no praise from me in this matter!... Those who eat and drink without discerning the Body of Christ eat and drink condemnation on themselves." (1 Corinthians 11:17-22, 29 *TIB*)

BARNABAS:

Paul's anger here is not because of division caused by attitudes around circumcision or kosher food. Here it was wealth and status that fractured the community. And these were just as dangerous to the gospel. When this Corinthian community gathered for worship, like many early Christian communities, they shared a sort of potluck meal that led into a time of telling stories and singing hymns and culminated in the Last Supper. But in Corinth the wealthy members of the community came early with their food and started eating, while those who were servants or slaves arrived later, finding only crumbs left. So by the time they celebrated the Last Supper, the divisions between the haves and the have-nots, far from disappearing, were etched in the hunger and humiliation of those who came last. It was precisely what the meal was *not* supposed to be.

GALATIAN BELIEVERS:

Paul's anger, at us, at Peter, and at the Corinthians, was *real* exactly because his experience of grace was *real*. Jesus sometimes spoke of the Kingdom of God as "at hand" – near enough to touch. (Mark 1:15 *TIB*) Paul seemed to touch that kingdom regularly, and he invited the rest of us to join him there. We lived out of that free gift of God's love – or we altogether failed to live in grace. In the early church Paul hoped that baptism and the Last Supper would *be* moments of grace for us. And while they were occasionally moments of disagreement and failure, they were more often than not opportunities for the Spirit to touch our lives, claiming us exactly as we were for grace... at the table and far beyond.

LYDIA:

The church two thousand years ago was brimful of people with differences. You might say we had more difference than we knew what to do with. Some – such as the possibility that, far from being a woman of means, I was a former slave – are more invisible to you than they were to us. Others – like race, class, and gender – are still sources of division for you today. And some of the differences we struggled with back then – like circumcision and kosher food – don't matter much to you today because, I suppose, you've found new differences to focus on instead. But for you, just as for us, Paul's words remain like a beacon of what can be, *because truly it already is*: "Each one of you is a child of God because of your faith in Christ Jesus. All of you who have been baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. In Christ there is no Jew or Greek, slave or citizen, male or female. All are one in Christ Jesus." (Galatians 3:26-28 *TIB*)

* * *

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

NARRATOR:

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

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

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

NARRATOR:

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

What insights did you gain from this experience?

1. What challenges or questions did it raise for you?
2. Of the main characters in the script (Paul, Peter Barnabas, Titus, the Galatian believers, Lydia, and the Narrator) where do you see their views or experience reflected in the current church — or in your own life?
3. 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.

HEARTS UNBOUND

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

by David R. Weiss

10

SODOMY MEANS INHOSPITALITY:
The Tale of Sodom and Gomorrah

GENESIS 19:1–25

National Gay and Lesbian
Task Force



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Permission is given to download and photocopy this script for use by church or community groups.

Hearts Unbound

by David R. Weiss

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

Affirm United/S'affirmer Ensemble
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Brethren Mennonite Council for LGBT Interests
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Integrity USA
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Reconciling Ministries Network
Room for All
Welcoming Community Network

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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

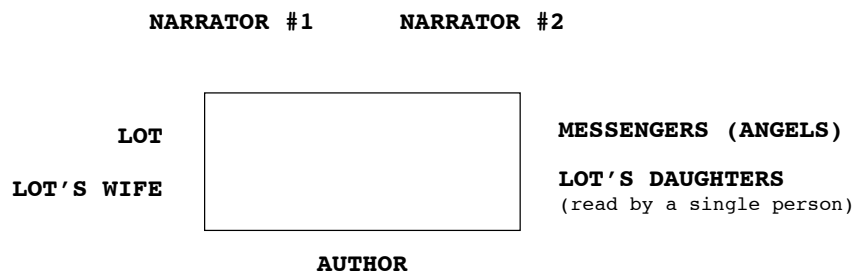
This script invites you to explore a scene from the Book of Genesis, chapter 19, from the inside, through seven roles created to bring insight to this key passage. These roles are: (1) Lot, (2) the Messengers (angels), (3) Lot's Daughters, (4) Lot's wife, (5) the Author, and (6-7) two Narrators. If necessary, to accommodate groups of six or eight, the roles of Lot's wife and Daughters can be read by one person, or the Author's role can be shared by two persons.

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

The Narrators will guide you through the scenes, reading from Genesis to begin each brief conversation and offering occasional insights. The Narrators likely haven't seen any of this material before either, so these persons aren't "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 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 this important Genesis text.

Suggestion: *It will help keep the roles/voices clear for everyone if the Narrators sit at one end of the group, with Lot and Lot's wife to one side and the Messengers and Lot's daughters to the other side. The Author 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 this key passage about the events leading up to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah and to 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.

LOT:

My name is _____, and I'll be reading the part of **Lot**, the nephew of Abraham. Although Lot doesn't come across as a shining hero in this tale, it was his righteousness that prompted God to save Lot and his family from the intended destruction of Sodom.

LOT'S WIFE:

My name is _____, and I'll be reading the part of **Lot's wife**. Like many female characters, Lot's wife appears in this biblical story but never gets to utter a word. The author uses her voice here to remind us that women have *always* been part of God's people – and their voices (even when unheard) have mattered.

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.

MESSENGERS:

My name is _____, and I'll be reading the part of the **Messengers**. Although it becomes clear in the story that these "men" are indeed *angels*, their outward appearance doesn't show this; they look like ordinary "messengers."

LOT'S DAUGHTERS:

My name is _____, and I'll be reading the part of **Lot's Daughters**. Although they speak no words in this episode, the author of this script demands that we dare to imagine their voice in this text.

AUTHOR:

My name is _____, and I'll be reading the part of the biblical **Author**. Although tradition names Moses as the author of Genesis, scholars today agree that Genesis was written later than Moses and was the product of several ancient authors (all unnamed) who collected the earliest stories of Israel's life. In any case, in my role in this Reader's Theater, I will offer "behind the scenes" comments to help you understand the story from the author's perspective.

NARRATOR (2):

Our first scene opens as the angels arrive in town: "The two messengers arrived at Sodom in the evening, and found Lot sitting by the city gate. When he saw them, he rose to meet them, then bowed so deeply that he touched the ground, saying, 'Please, honorable travelers, come to your faithful one's house. Wash your feet, and refresh yourselves and spend the night. You can continue your journey in the morning.' 'No,' they answered, 'we will spend the night in the square.' But Lot urged them so strongly that they agreed to come to his house. Lot prepared a meal for them, baking unleavened bread, which they ate." (Genesis 19:1-3 *TIB*)

AUTHOR:

Now, although the translation used here (*The Inclusive Bible*) does indeed speak of two "messengers," most Bible translations call them "angels." That's what they are, but don't imagine people-with-wings. The Hebrew word used here simply means "messenger." And in most cases that's how it gets translated. Here, because these persons are on a mission from God, many biblical translations use the word "angels." But we need to remember they look entirely human. Nothing in their appearance

Don't neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing so some people have entertained angels without knowing it. (Hebrews 13:2 *TIB*)

alarms Lot or gives any indication that they're heavenly beings. And if you can't get angel wings out of your mind you won't understand what happens in this passage. Neither Lot nor the townsmen realize they're dealing with angels until the end of the scene. Lot is doing exactly as the writer of Hebrews urged in the New Testament: he's entertaining angels, but not because he knows they're angels. He thinks he's simply showing hospitality to strangers.

LOT:

That's right. And that's important. Because this tale is about hospitality, about offering welcome and refuge – especially to the vulnerable. And while these men don't look particularly vulnerable – after all, I address them as “honorable travelers” – they are unknown in these parts. And, in the ancient world, to be on the road and unknown *made you vulnerable*. I'm not trying to welcome heavenly guests into my home. I'm just trying to keep these two men out of the town square during the night.

MESSENGERS:

Although these verses don't indicate that we're anything more than human travelers on a journey, if you've read the last chapter (Genesis 18) you know who we are and what we're up to. In chapter 18 (verse 2), it says that “three travelers” came to visit Abraham and Sarah. In the course of that chapter you learn that these “travelers” are, in fact, God and the two of us. During this visit the birth of Isaac is foretold,

* (see next page) The Hebrew text literally says “her cry.” The medieval rabbis commented on this extensively. In the Chapters of the Rabbi Eliezer (25), it is written: “Rabbi Yehudah said, ‘They issued a proclamation in Sodom: Anyone who strengthens the hand of the poor or the strangers will be burnt by fire. Peletit, daughter of Lot was married to one of the nobles of Sodom. She saw an afflicted poor man in the street of the city, and her soul grieved for him. What did she do? Every day when she went out to draw water, she put in her bucket all sorts of food from her home, and she fed that poor man. The people of Sodom said, ‘How does this poor man survive?’ Finally they discovered the matter — and brought her out to be burned. She said, ‘Lord of the world! Uphold my just cause against the people of Sodom!’ Her cry ascended before the Throne of Glory. The blessed Holy One said, ‘I will go down and see [if they have done altogether] according to her cry that has come to Me. If the people of Sodom have done according to the cry of this girl, I will overturn its foundations and its surface!’ — as is said: according to her cry. It is not written, according to their cry, but rather: according to her cry.” (Cited in The Zohar 2: Pritzker Edition, translated by Daniel Chanan Matt, Stanford University Press, 2004, Volume 1, page 145, footnote 224.)

For other references see:

<http://www.iwgonline.org/docs/sodom.html>

and at the end of it, God reveals our mission to Abraham, saying, "The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is terrible and their sin is so grave that I must go down and see for myself. If they have done what her cry* against them accuses them of, I will destroy them. If not, I need to know that, too." (Genesis 18:20-21 *TIB*) We were to be God's eyes and ears in Sodom.

LOT:

Of course, I didn't know that when I made my offer of hospitality. But perhaps I did know that the town square was not a safe place to spend the night. Perhaps it was my habit to sit by the town gate in the evening, just so that I could extend the refuge of my home to any travelers who might be passing through.

MESSENGERS:

And perhaps we intended to spend the night in the square because we knew that the outcry against Sodom had everything to do with what happened to those who were vulnerable in its midst.

AUTHOR:

Years later that reputation would be echoed by the prophets. Isaiah, speaking in the voice of God, accused Israel of acting like Sodom, saying, "You are the perpetrators who destroy my vineyard! What you've plundered from the poor is still in your house! Why do you crush my people and grind the faces of the poor into the ground?" (Isaiah 3:14-15 *TIB*) He told them that in order to *no longer* be like Sodom and Gomorrah they must: "Learn to do good! Search for justice and help the oppressed! Protect those who are orphaned and plead the case of those who are widowed!" (Isaiah 1:17 *TIB*) Apparently these things were acutely absent in these cities. And Ezekiel calls Israel Sodom's "sister," and explains this metaphor by noting that Sodom "had abundant food and not a care in the world, but she refused to help the poor and needy." (Ezekiel 16:49 *TIB*)

MESSENGERS:

Can we be more clear? We were *not* sent to investigate the sexual practices of the cities. We were sent to discover whether it was true that widows and orphans, that the destitute and the traveler, were mistreated by the people who prospered in these parts. We were sent to

test their hospitality. Two thousand years later Jesus would tell his followers, whatever you do to “the least of my sisters or brothers” (Matthew 25:40 *TIB*) you do to me. Unassuming and unknown, we entered Sodom as “the least of these,” but we came as representatives of God.

NARRATOR (2):

Today we take for granted that when we’re traveling we’ll either have friends to stay with or we’ll find a motel room at the end of the day. But 4,000 years ago, when this tale is set, travel was a gamble. From sandstorms to daytime heat or nighttime chill, the weather was unforgiving. And from desert bandits to highway robbers to hostile villages, the human world in which travelers moved could be equally unforgiving.

AUTHOR:

That’s why hospitality held such a high place in ancient codes of ethics. It was a measure of an entire people’s character. Eventually hospitality became part of Israel’s ethos as a people — and it remains a hallmark of Judaism even in your day. Elsewhere in the Bible my people were often reminded that they spent years as sojourners themselves, especially in the generations they spent as slaves in Egypt. They knew what it was like to live precariously, at the mercy of others who were often less than merciful. Indeed, when Job defends himself as innocent during his time of suffering he exclaims as

Do not mistreat or oppress foreigners, for you once were foreigners in Egypt. Do not take advantage of widows or orphans. If you do afflict them, they will cry out to me — and be certain that I will hear their complaint. (Exodus 22:21-23 *TIB*)

Do not oppress foreigners, for you know what it is to be a foreigner — you were foreigners in Egypt. (Exodus 23:9 *TIB*)

When you reap the harvest from your fields, do not cut the grain to the very edges of the field, or gather in all the gleanings. Nor are you to completely strip your vines or pick up the fallen fruit. Leave the extra grain and fruit for the poor people and foreigners to gather for themselves. I am YHWH. (Leviticus 19:9-10 *TIB*)

Do not mistreat the foreigners who reside in your land. The foreigner who lives among you must be treated like one of your own. Love them as you love yourself, for you too were a foreigner in the land of Egypt. I am YHWH. (Leviticus 19:33-34 *TIB*)

Share your bread with those who are hungry, and shelter homeless poor people! Clothe those who are naked, and don’t hide from the needs of your own flesh and blood! (Isaiah 58:7 *TIB*)

proof of his character, "Haven't the members of my household said of me, 'Is there anyone who hasn't eaten your food?' I've always taken in wayfarers for a night rather than make them spend the night in the open." (Job 31:31-32 *TIB*)

LOT:

Like Job, I valued hospitality within my faith and my culture – and I knew the dangers that might befall them in the town square. So I did not relent until they agreed to lodge under my roof. I made them a feast and we began to talk.

LOT'S WIFE:

Actually, he means that *I* made a feast. But it's telling that the story gives him the credit. See, in the ancient world, in ways that you can hardly imagine, women were barely worth mentioning. I'm not saying that there wasn't affection between Lot and myself, but everything in our culture said I was his property. A companion, yes, but property nonetheless, as were our daughters, too. It was a man's world back then. Verse 3 isn't the only place in this passage where the action, the voices, the lives of women are undervalued. So pay attention. But don't blame the author or Lot for this. Their words and attitudes were completely shaped by their world. You might wish they had thought differently, but you can't change them; you can only ever change yourselves. In any case, there was a feast. Everyone ate well, and the men talked long into night.

NARRATOR (1):

In the next scene, Lot's fears about the risk to the messengers (had they stayed in the town square) prove all too well-founded. We read: "Before they had retired to the sleeping quarters, the men of Sodom surrounded the house, young and old, down to the last man in town, yelling to Lot, 'Where are these travelers who entered your house today? Bring them out to us, and let us "know" them too!' Lot went out before the crowd, closing the door behind him, and pleaded with them saying, 'No, friends, don't do such a wicked thing.'" (Genesis 19:4-7 *TIB*)

AUTHOR:

Now listen, I gathered up and wrote down the stories of my people,

the folktales of how we came to be. See, people draw their lives from the stories they tell, especially the ones they tell again and again. In fact, a people without stories is not really a people at all. And, of course, all people like their stories to be heroic. And many of my stories were heroic, but it's just as important for a people's stories to be *honest*. And this story is about to become painfully honest. There are tales that felt almost venomous for me to record, but too important for me to forget. This is such a tale.

NARRATOR (2):

Notice who came to surround the house: all the men, from young to old, every last one of them. This was not the action of a handful of hooligans; this was *an entire town committed to terror*. It was a culture where violence had become a pastime. Did you know that in the late 1800's and early 1900's in parts of the Southern U.S. it was a popular pastime in some white families to bring children to lynchings of African Americans? They would even get photographs of the body hanging from a tree and turn them into postcards to send to family and friends. *That's* violence as a pastime. *That* was the culture of Sodom.

AUTHOR:

I hope you understand that when the townsmen tell Lot they want to "know" the men staying with him, they're not asking to be formally introduced. The Hebrew word translated as "to know" carries a wide range of meanings from knowledge to understanding to acquaintance to skill. But it is also the word used for sexual penetration. So Genesis 4:1 reads, "Now Adam knew his wife Eve, and she conceived and bore Cain." In that case, it means the intimacy of sexual love. In this case, outside Lot's home, the townsmen are announcing their intent to *gang rape* the travelers whom Lot had taken into his home.

LOT:

I still find such wickedness hard to imagine. This was the brutality of my world, at least in some corners. It was a common practice for the soldiers of a conquering army to rape the soldiers of the vanquished force. It was a way of humiliating them, of "reducing" them to a woman in a world where only men counted. And, occasionally, in towns like Sodom and Gomorrah, gang rape practiced against travelers was a way of saying, with a brutal emphasis: you're not welcome in these parts.

This wasn't about sex, either homosexual or heterosexual. It was about raw power, and finding someone on whom to wield it.

NARRATOR (1):

Because we've heard this story so often associated with same-sex activity it may be hard to hear it otherwise. But from *inside* the text, *inside* the history, *inside* the culture, it was a story about using terror to maintain power. Think of the worst things that happen during a college hazing or a gang initiation, or the unspeakable ways that anal rape in prisons reinforces power dynamics that have nothing to do with a consensual relationship. Worse, we know today of multiple organized methodical sexual atrocities carried out in the 20th century: from the Rape of Nanking to the use of rape as a *strategy* in the Bosnian and Kosovo wars and in Rwanda, Darfur, Zimbabwe, and Congo. Sodom was hardly the first community – and sadly far from the last one – to deploy sexual violence to terrorize the vulnerable. Both yesterday and still today whole communities have abused sexuality like this. It isn't hard to see, except when all the messages are telling you to look in another direction.

NARRATOR (2):

Next, in one of the most terrifying scenes in the Bible, Lot tries to persuade the townsmen not to attack his guests. "[And Lot said,] 'Look, I have two young daughters who are virgins – take them and do whatever you want with them, but do nothing to these travelers, for they are enjoying the protection of my hospitality.' But the crowd yelled, 'Stand aside!' They said, 'This fellow Lot came into our community as a foreigner, and now he would play the judge. We will treat him to worse than his visitors!' They crowded around Lot and pressed close in order to break down the door. But the travelers reached out and pulled Lot inside, shutting the door behind him. Then all the men who were at the door, great and small, were blinded by a dazzling light so that they were unable to find the entrance. (Genesis 19:8–11 *TIB*)

LOT:

Listen, you cannot comprehend what I did here unless you understand just how *sacred* the obligation of hospitality was in that time. These messengers had come under *my* roof. I was obliged – almost under an oath – to do whatever was needed to protect them. *Whatever was needed.*

LOT'S WIFE:

How is it that I was silent in these verses? How dare Lot offer my own daughters up to those beasts?! But where is *my* voice? Where are *my* words of protest? Left unrecorded... and most likely unspoken. My culture gave me no words to say in a moment like this. I am sure my mouth was open in a silent anguished cry, but it went unheard, except by the eyes of my daughters.

LOT'S DAUGHTERS:

We weren't silent. I can promise you that. Never mind that we had been raised to honor hospitality, too. We were virgins! Barely more than children, no doubt. And surely our terror spoke volumes. We screamed in protest. Who were we to be offered up like a sacrifice to satisfy the twisted desire for violence against someone vulnerable? Don't you see, our father offered us in exchange for the safety of the messengers because he was convinced that the townsmen didn't care whether they raped men or women. He was certain that any pound of flesh would do.

LOT:

Was I right to offer my daughters? I'll never know. But before you judge me, at least notice that I risked my own safety in daring to challenge the townsmen at all. Were it not for the holy messengers who pulled me back inside, my attempt to bargain with the townsmen would've resulted in my rape – or worse.

NARRATOR (1):

We'll never know why the men rejected Lot's offer of his own daughters. Most likely in their frenzied aggression they wanted to make their point – assert their power – in the strongest way possible. To violate the girls – even to violate Lot himself – would've stopped short of making their message most clear: "No one, not even male guests, is welcome here. In this place, everyone who is not an insider is *outside* in the most perilous way possible."

MESSENGERS:

We had seen enough by now. The outcry that had reached God – the voices of widows and orphans whose needs were ignored, the cries of the destitute and travelers whose lives had been violated – bore

witness against these men. Here, in their own voices, they condemned themselves. Our concern now was to insure the safety of Lot's family, both tonight... and tomorrow.

LOT'S DAUGHTERS:

We were glad the messengers were there – and that their powers were sufficient to keep us safe. Well, it would be more accurate to say we were “relieved.” We huddled together in the corner while our father and the messengers conferred at the table. Wrapped in a blanket against the night's chill, if we slept it came as the sparse gift of fear and exhaustion, not because we ever relaxed.

AUTHOR:

What these girls could not know is that the next time a tale like this played out in the Bible the woman does not survive. For the moment, the terror abates in my story. The next time it does not abate at all.

NARRATOR (2):

The other tale is found in Judges 19:1-30. There, in a story set about 800 years later than this one, a man and his concubine are traveling...

AUTHOR:

A concubine was a female companion akin to a mistress, perhaps. In the passage he is referred to as her “husband,” so their relationship has a status that's at least close to marriage. But, remember, in the ancient world, even marriage was about men keeping intimate property, not about love.

NARRATOR (1):

Along with a servant, the man and his concubine find themselves in the town square of a small city at the end of the day. They are taken into the care of a local man. And that night, men from the town surround the house and announce their desire to rape the male guest. The householder offers his virgin daughter and the man's concubine to pacify the men. But they want the male traveler. Their anger grows and then the traveler, apparently in fear for his life, pushes his concubine outside the door, where the men “took her away and raped her repeatedly all night long until the morning.” (Judges 19:25 *TIB*) The next morning her husband finds her collapsed outside the house. He

simply tells her to "get up," and when she can't he loads her on his donkey and heads home. She dies along the way.

LOT'S DAUGHTERS:

Don't you see, now? *These tales are about the abuse of power.* They have nothing to do with "appropriate" or "inappropriate" love. They aren't concerned with sexual orientation. Whatever judgments you make about same-sex love, it has nothing to do with this text from Genesis. When you interpret it that way you make our presence – our vulnerability – invisible in this text. You make our fear beside the point. But we, too, were among the least of these.

LOT'S WIFE:

My daughters have been invisible for so long! Isn't it time to really see them? Sure, readers of this story have felt sorry for them and have felt contempt for my husband, but they have also felt that the danger was never real. Readers have believed that it was, after all, a "gay mob" gathered outside. And what interest would they have in a couple of girls? But this second tale from Judges 19 makes the danger very clear. These mobs were never about sexual attraction, they were about raw abusive power. Nothing more.

NARRATOR (2):

This story concludes with Lot's escape and the destruction of the cities: "Then the two travelers asked Lot, 'Do you have anyone else here – daughters, sons, or their spouses, or anyone else in the city? Get them out of this place, for we are about to destroy it. The clamor against its people is terrible before YHWH, who sent us to destroy it.' So Lot went to his future sons-in-law, who were betrothed to his daughters, and said, 'Get out of the city, for YHWH is about to destroy it!' But the young men treated the warning as a jest. When the dawn broke, the travelers urged Lot, 'Come, flee with your spouse and your two daughters, or you will be swept away in the punishment of Sodom.' Lot hesitated, but because YHWH was merciful, the travelers took Lot, his spouse, and their two daughters by the hand, and led them out and left them outside the city." (Genesis 19:12-16 *TIB*)

NARRATOR (1):

Over the next few verses Lot is told to run for the hills, but he

asks permission to run instead to the nearest small town. The angels grant this, but we later learn that he's too scared even to stay there and winds up living in a cave with his two daughters. (Lot's wife famously looks back at Sodom's destruction and is turned into a pillar of salt.) Lot himself succumbs to what we today would call post-traumatic stress disorder. It is an unhappy ending to an unhappy tale. Our portion of the tale concludes: "Then YHWH rained brimstone and fire down from heaven on Sodom and Gomorrah, destroying those cities and the whole plain, with all the inhabitants of the towns, and everything that grew on the land." (Genesis 19:24-25 TIB)

AUTHOR:

It is a strange tale, I confess. Lot is apparently saved from destruction because he is righteous. (Immediately before this story Abraham has bargained with God about saving the handful of righteous from Sodom before destroying it.) But even Lot offers his daughters up for rape. He seems paralyzed by the angels' words that he must flee, and he is frozen by indecision over which direction to flee. Lot's righteousness seems marginal at best. In fact, by the end of the chapter Lot is a widower, hiding in a cave and fearfully isolating his daughters from a world that has proven too much for his nerves. The tale ends with his two daughters taking turns getting him drunk so they can sleep with him and become pregnant in order to have children. It is the sort of honest and ugly messiness that hides somewhere in many families. But it is hardly a folktale that offers examples of good behavior or even faithfulness.

MESSENGERS:

So why is this tale here at all? As Lot's daughters have argued, this tale has nothing to do with sexuality of any sort. But almost every Christian in your day would tell you immediately that the story of Sodom and Gomorrah is about God's judgment against homosexuality. It's true that the ancient world differed from yours in many ways, and its understanding of sexuality would strike you as plenty foreign as well. But our mission was to investigate the outcry made against the city, and when Ezekiel and Isaiah make reference to Sodom in their writings, they are clear that the "outcry" had to do quite specifically with *Sodom's treatment of the vulnerable ones in its midst*. In this tale, the threatened rape of us is simply the final damning bit of evidence

against them. We were the last of the "least of these" that the men of Sodom would ever threaten.

LOT'S DAUGHTERS:

It's strange isn't it? Until you recognize the *distance* that sits between this tale and your day, you can't hear the way it just might describe situations that are *very close* to you.

AUTHOR:

That's right. Nearly 2,000 years after this tale takes place, Jesus, like the prophets, echoes back to Sodom and Gomorrah. For 2,000 years their "reputation" has been recognized as examples of the worst sort of indifference shown to the marginal and inhospitality shown to travelers. In Matthew he says that even Sodom will have it easier on the day of judgment than those cities which refused to listen to him.

[Jesus said,] "As for you, Capernaum... if the miracles worked for you had taken place in Sodom, it would be standing today. But the truth is, it will go easier for Sodom than for you on Judgment Day." (Matthew 11:24 *TIB*)

NARRATOR (2):

But Matthew also explains *why* these towns spurned Jesus' message: because he was "a friend of tax collectors and sinners" (Matthew 11:19 *TIB*). The point being made by Jesus is not just that Sodom was also condemned by God, but that it was condemned *for its treatment of the marginal* – and yet even it will fare better than those towns who are put off by Jesus' acceptance of those at the social and economic margins.

MESSENGERS:

In a similar passage in Luke, Jesus links Sodom directly to inhospitality. He sends his disciples out, two by two, to preach. They are instructed to travel without money or purse or sandals; they are to travel *intentionally vulnerable*, entrusting themselves entirely to the hospitality of the towns to which they go. When he says that those towns failing to welcome them will fare worse than Sodom on

[Jesus said,] "If the people of any town you enter don't welcome you... I tell you, on that day the fate of Sodom will be less severe than that of such a town. (Luke 10:10,12 *TIB*)

judgment day, he chooses Sodom for a comparison not because of anything sexual about Sodom's sin, but because they were the best known example of a disastrous breach of hospitality. As badly as Sodom miscalculated the honor due their unknown guests, these towns have miscalculated even worse. Their inhospitality will cost them even more.

NARRATOR (1):

Whether Jesus was aware of Sodom as a town infamous for sexual perversity we do not know. What we *do know* is that he spoke of it as a city that epitomized the very things that his ministry sought to overcome: that is, attitudes and actions that exclude anyone from the community to which God beckons them.

LOT'S DAUGHTERS:

So you see when the distance across eras and cultures is respected – when you set aside the impulse to hear this story as condemning homosexuality – you can finally hear it as a story that actually condemns inhospitality. And at that point a troubling irony appears. Because while “sodomy” has come to be your word for the “sin” of homosexuality that so many in the church denounce, it suddenly seems more likely that “sodomy” – *as condemned in this tale* – is the very *inhospitality that the church practices*. Have you ever considered that?

* * *

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

NARRATOR (2):

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 persons who seem so other to us today, speaking as Lot, the Messengers, Lot's wife, Lot's daughters, the Author, and the 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 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 this passage from Genesis 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 (Lot, the Messengers, Lot's wife, Lot's daughters, the Author, and the Narrators) 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.

