

HEARTS UNBOUND

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

by David R. Weiss

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CRUMBS FOR DOGS:
Jesus' Encounter with the Canaanite Woman

MATTHEW 15:21–28

National Gay and Lesbian
Task Force



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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

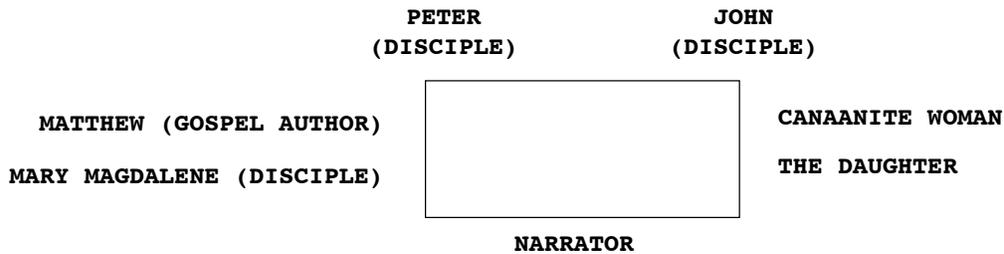
This script invites you to explore a scene in Matthew’s Gospel from the inside, through seven roles created to bring insight to this key passage. These roles are: (1) Matthew, the evangelist, (2) Canaanite woman, (3) the Daughter, (4) Peter, a disciple, (5) Mary Magdalene, a disciple, (6) John, a disciple, 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 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.