

“Some Good News!”  
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Have any of you watched a show that began on Youtube during the pandemic, called *Some Good News*? In the first couple months of the pandemic, when Chris would see me growing anxious after spending too long doom-scrolling, desperate to find a word of hope in a sea of bad news, she would sit me down to watch this show. Hosted by a comedian from the show *The Office*, *Some Good News*-- or *SGN*-- is a 20 minute show of whatever the host could gather that was heart-warming and funny; all good news. Usually some part of the show would make me cry-- the happy kind of tears.

The word Gospel in English comes from an old Anglo-Saxon term that means good-telling; in Greek, we have the word Euangelion, which means “good news.” I usually like what Jesus has to tell us. I think about it as good news. That’s why I am here, proclaiming Christ; he is one I love so much, I have built an entire career around sharing the good news he teaches. If he were running for office, I would want to work on his campaign, because I truly do believe in Jesus’ vision for our world, and what Jesus modeled for us about loving God, and loving each other. Which is why there was a big part of me that wanted to skip this reading in the gospel. Jesus, my role model, said something so cringeworthy, that I would like to just flip to the next page and pretend it wasn’t there. Some good news!

Here is the offending statement: after telling those assembled-- the disciples and the Canaanite woman included-- “I was only sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel,” Jesus continued-- when met with the woman’s pleas for healing for her daughter, continued, “it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.”

Jesus called the Canaanite woman and her child dogs-- which seems to me a racial slur, if you understand it in the context of Israel’s history with the Canaanites. The Canaanites were set up throughout the bible as the unclean, impure, worshippers of false gods... if there was ever an *us* vs. *them* in the bible, it was the Israelites vs. the Canaanites-- and the biblical narrative often uses these differences to justify the conquest of Canaanite land.

And I don’t know whether he did it in an ironic way, as in, he was drawing out what he knew what his disciples, the chosen ones of Israel, were already thinking-- just so he could expose their racist thoughts, and while they were thinking yeah, yeah, that dog! He flips it, to everyone’s surprise, to a generous act of grace and care. But if that’s what Jesus was doing, the retelling of this story doesn’t make it quite clear.

Or, worse-- Jesus could have let this slur just slip out. Many commentators suggest this is Jesus just showing his very human side, putting his foot in his mouth like so many of us are

prone to do. Relying on the sorts of things those he knew from the neighborhood, his family, even the Temple might have said, it might have been the first sort of thing that slipped out of his mouth when he was tired and unfocused. Maybe in that moment he forgot he was not only a representative of, but also supposed to be the fulfillment of, God's Beloved Community. They say that because we are taught racism by those who love us, it is wedged so deeply into the fabric of our thought processes that it takes real intention to sort out those thoughts so that we don't rely on them. Maybe we caught Jesus in a less intentional moment.

Either way-- whether it was Jesus using language ironically to make a point, or whether Jesus in a moment of weakness dropping a racist slur that he had to backpedal from by doing exactly what this Canaanite woman had asked, which was to heal her daughter-- either way, I have trouble getting from *this* Jesus, to the Jesus who shows us that God's love is too generous to be hoarded by one choice of people, one nation, one race. I don't know how to move from naming what may be hurtful language in the text, from Jesus' mouth, to using it as a tool for spiritual liberation and empowerment.

Put more simply, I wonder, is this gospel good news just for some, or is it good news for all?

To help my reading, I decided to look at the story with a different lens, with help from the global church to see if it could point us toward some good news. I found research on this passage from Dr. Musa Dube, a New Testament scholar from Botswana, in Southern Africa. She will soon be teaching at my seminary, Candler School of Theology at Emory University. Dr. Dube explored this passage among women leaders in the African Independent Churches in Botswana-- these are churches that were formed by Africans who left the churches of European missionary descent, to start their own churches, "with all their gifts and freedom." She took this particular passage and interviewed women leaders in these churches, as well as listened to sermons preached on this passage in different ones of these churches. In the style of preaching in African Independent Churches, Dr. Dube said, the sermon doesn't just belong to the pastor; once the scripture is read, anyone in the church may stand and state what they understand the passage to be telling the church-- and this is done by young and old, men and women. As this communal preaching is shared, if there is a song that helps bring to life the theme of the scripture, someone might break into song. In addition to singing, sometimes participants use drama or dance to help convey the message, and they might repeat phrases or words that they feel are particularly important to the theme. The culture has an assumption that "a story well-told is a story well-interpreted." This traditional method of interpretation capitalizes on recalling, narrating, and dramatizing the story without explicitly defining what it means. Instead, the meaning is articulated by graphically bringing the story to life through a dramatic narration." (Dube, <sup>1</sup>120).

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<sup>1</sup> Musa W. Dube, "Readings of Semoya: Batswana Women's Interpretations of Matthew 15:21-28" in *Semeia*, January 1, 1996 pp.111-129

If we could be together it might be fun to have that chance, for you to act out the scripture, sing about it, repeat the phrases you think the Spirit is trying to point us to today.

Something that stood out to me in Dube's research with these churches in Botswana is that overall, they did not tend to focus on the Canaanite woman as downtrodden, impoverished, or faithless. Instead, they noted that the Torah spoke of the land of Canaan as a land of milk and honey. They suggested that the Canaanite woman was bringing before Jesus, in her abundant faith, a taste of milk and honey, the spiritual and material abundance of her land. What she has is so much better than crumbs, and it stands in contrast to the lack of faith the disciples in that moment were showing. One woman, who was a bishop in the church, suggested that Jesus sided with the woman all along, saying, "Indeed it is not good to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs. Rather, it must go to those who deserve it, like you" and your daughter! The bishop also believed that the woman's comeback to Jesus-- "Yes Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master's table" was a way of pushing Jesus to show generosity towards the closed-minded disciples. I had never read this scripture with such a lens, but I find this idea very inspired! In the end, it is not through the expected heirs that God's grace comes forth; it is through the outside voice. In the end, a child is healed.

Another thing that the Batswana people saw was the push of the Spirit, or *Moya*, as they called it. They said it was the *Moya*, their word for Spirit, at work in the beginning of the story, *causing* Jesus to head to Tyre and Sido-- places that were beyond the boundaries of Israel. The Spirit continued to work in Jesus, despite himself; even when he was repeating narratives that relied on old stereotypes, the Spirit-- showing up in the persistent voice of a Canaanite mother-- kept pushing him beyond himself toward that transformative healing moment. And that healing moment, in the Batswana reading of the text, was a loud and celebratory occasion, one that bore repeating and singing in the worship and preaching. Healing is a central part of worship in African Independent Churches-- and not just physical healing. They hold a belief that just as the body and soul can be healed, so can the wounds of imperialism, unemployment, broken relationships, and rejection-- remade and reformed into something that can actually give life. As I read their various interpretations, one thing stood out: these Batswana women recognized that those words about undeserving dogs didn't belong to the Canaanite woman, and they didn't belong to them. Therefore, the harsh words did not have to get in the way of hearing-- and experiencing-- some good news.

We see such a healing in our Genesis story today as well. The wounds of a family that has been broken for generations do not hold Joseph back from experiencing the Spirit. Instead of belonging to old grudges of the ways his brothers harmed him years back, he belongs to God. He offers forgiveness and reconciliation, because he is already free from what they have done to him, and it has no power over him. He is able to see himself as part of God's bigger story. And that is some good news.

I don't know about you, but the next time I fall into a pit after too much doom-scrolling, I am going to try to step back a little, and consider how the Spirit is pushing at the edges of the

narrative that is shaping up. Just like the Canaanite woman, she is insisting on our attention, insisting on hope, insisting on healing. Maybe her voice will come from an unexpected corner. Maybe her voice will change how I see myself and the world. Maybe her voice will call me to take a bold action that brings some good news. Amen.