

# **“Life in God’s Back Yard”**

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Scripture: Matthew 15:21-28

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Well, she had lost track of how long it had been since her daughter first became so sick. At first she went to holy men and healers among her own people. But one after another they turned her away. Word began to spread that her daughter was more than just sick; she was possessed by something evil, they said. Her friends and leaders stopped turning her away and began blocking her from approaching them at all.

That’s when she started hovering around the city gate. She had no choice but to approach strangers because everyone who knew her and knew about her daughter had turned their backs.

Jesus’ reputation was already spreading. Even in her region there were rumors of a healer and holy man who seemed to be doing amazing things. The most amazing was that he was going to them. She didn’t have to make a pilgrimage and try to coax her daughter along. Jesus came to her. Right to her village; to the very gate where she stood, day after day.

She wasn’t one of his people, she knew that. But she knew a few things about his tradition, and she had learned how to be persuasive when talking to healers. And where persuasion wouldn’t work, there was always persistence. She would just keep nagging to get his attention.

It wasn’t the kind of attention she wanted, that’s for sure, but it was something. It was an opening, a crack in the wall of hostility between his people and hers. So if he wanted to call her a dog, what did she care? She had been called worse by her own neighbors. Without thinking she shot back her reply: “Even dogs get a few crumbs from the table.”

She heard the men around him take in their breath, saw the anger on their faces at her disrespect. And Jesus stopped. He gave her the funniest look. Maybe she had gone too far with him. She didn’t mean he was offering garbage; she was just trying to help her daughter, and she knew he could do it. Her eyes narrowed as she waited for him to tear into her. But his face broke out into the biggest smile, and not a derisive smile like all her so-called friends, but a smile of admiration. He was impressed with her, pleased even. “You have a huge faith!” he laughed. “Go on, your daughter is healed.” And somewhere in her heart, in her soul, she knew it was true and her waiting was over.

You know, sometimes it takes someone from the outside to help us understand who we really are and what our relationship with God is really all about. When you’re living in God’s back yard you can forget just how big it really is. That can happen to

anyone. It happened to Jesus' disciples all the time. But this time it even happened to Jesus. Maybe for a moment he forgot just how big God's yard could be. And it took this foreigner, this woman from the outside, to remind him.

Life in God's back yard means we're going to run into people we'd just as soon avoid. We're going to find people there who are different from us: different colors, different customs, different backgrounds, even different religions. Because in God's back yard there's a sign that says "Everyone is welcome!" And that sign isn't just posted on a locked gate or beneath a string of barbed wire. It's right in the middle where everyone can see it and there are no gates to open or fences to jump or walls to scale. Everyone is welcome in God's back yard.

Life in God's back yard is about making sure that everyone who comes near knows they are welcome. It's about reaching out and inviting in. It's about offering healing and compassion where there's only been sickness and rejection. It's about loving God, as we learned this week at VBS, with our whole heart, soul, mind and strength, and it's about loving others like we love ourselves – or the way God wants us to love ourselves, with the same joy Jesus showed that woman whose faith was so great.

She stepped into God's back yard that day. And just like her, when we put our trust in Jesus, we live in God's back yard, too. I think that's what this table is set up for today. Think of this table as God's back yard. It's a place where everyone is welcome. It's a place where we can bring the broken parts of our lives and find healing. It's a place where our trust in Jesus is met by his deep compassion, where our longing is met by his love.

So every one of you is invited. Every one of you is invited to come to this table and find your life in God's back yard.

Amen