

You Butter Believe It: *Mark 9:14-29*

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Here are some fun facts from the Iowa State Fair:

The heaviest pigeon weighed in at the Fair was 2 lbs., 7 oz. The heaviest boar was 1335 lbs. The largest “World Super Bull” - 3,404 pounds. And the largest rabbit: 22lbs, 5.5 oz.

The largest attendance in Fair history was last year, 1,117,398 people. Also last year, 119 animals were born in the building during the Fair, while 91,657 people went down the giant slide.

The hottest temperature ever recorded at the Fair was on August 16, 1983, at 108 degrees and it just happened to be Older Iowans' Day.

The largest grandstand act? 1972 Sonny and Cher, with 26,200 people. Was anyone here there? Must've been some show!

Over 70 foods are available on-a-stick. More than 40,000 ribbons, rosettes and banners are awarded annually. There have been 3 locomotive collisions at the fair. And if you unrolled all the toilet tissue stockpiled for the Fair, there would be 1,818 miles of toilet paper, which is the distance from here to Los Angeles. That's a lot of TP.¹

One more fact: this one is for our kids who went to visit Sarah Pratt two weeks ago as she was busy sculpting the butter. What year was most of the butter currently used in the butter sculptures purchased? 2005. You butter believe it. We realized that the butter was older than all our JYF kids and Dinky Disciples who were there. And yes, it smells like it, too. It udderly stinks. Sorry, was that too cheesy? I'm really milking this. Okay, okay no more-nure jokes. Mooving on...

All of it is really hard to believe, isn't it? I couldn't believe it all the first time I visited the fair. It was so overwhelming. I know, to you locals, it's normal. But there aren't no 3,404 pound World Super Bulls fairs where I come from!

The fair is a stark contrast to the way we normally look at the world. At the fair we celebrate fun and abundance. The best of agriculture, livestock and human creations are on display. So many people come together to create the enjoyment, be it the massive staff of the fair, or the artists, or the farmers, or those who raise the livestock--all so that people from around our state and the world, crossing every line of division, may come together and celebrate the wonders of our world--and there is so much to celebrate.

¹ Facts taken from the Iowa State Fair website: <https://www.iowastatefair.org/about/trivia/>

And yet, that's not the story we normally tell, is it? The normal story is one of fear, one that suggests the world is getting worse. That violence is everywhere. Lock your doors. Guard yourself. Don't trust. Don't hope. Terrorists. Zika Viruses. Violence on the streets. Poverty. Hunger. Political tensions. Racial tensions--getting worse, not better.

Watch 24-hour cable news and it's hard to believe there is much good *left* in the world. It's easy to let doubt and cynicism take over. Go to the fair if you want--but it's just an escape. There's so much need, so much suffering, so much to fear--how could you celebrate? How could you hope? How can you believe?

Belief is the theme of our passage today, and it's rather surprising. Certainly by now, after all that Jesus has done, people would believe in Jesus' power.

We skipped a few stories between last week and this week, but right before our story was the Transfiguration of Jesus, this great scene where the Disciples eyes are opened, and they see Jesus in all his true glory.

After such a religious high, Jesus and his inner circle of disciples come down from the mountain, only to find that the rest of the disciples are in a bit of a mess. A man has shown up with his son who is possessed by demons. The boy can't speak and he's had these violent seizures since he was a small child. His father is desperate, so, he comes to Jesus but only finds his disciples. Give them some credit--they try to cast out the boy's demon, but they can't. And when Jesus arrives, the crowd is in an uproar, and the disciples are arguing with the religious teachers. What a mess.

And what is Jesus' response? "You faithless generation, how much longer must I be among you? How much longer must I put up with you? Bring him to me."

It sort of sounds like something a parent might say after a long summer with the kids. "How much longer must I put up with you?" The man interrupts him: "If you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us," the man says.

And Jesus says, "If you are able! —All things can be done for the one who believes." Immediately the father of the child cries out, "I believe; help my unbelief!" A strange, but honest reply from the father, and with that reply, Jesus commands the evil spirit to leave the boy, and the boy is healed.

But the story continues. Later that evening, Jesus is alone with his disciples, and they ask him privately, "Why could we not cast it out?" And Jesus says to them, "This kind can come out only through prayer."

*"You faithless generation." "I believe; help my unbelief."
"This kind can come out only through prayer."*

Jesus seems upset at the disciples for their inability to help this man and his son. And he's taken aback by the man's response to him, "*If you are able.*" Jesus sees the world very differently from his disciples and from the crowds around him--and from us.

To Jesus, "all things are possible", and you *better* believe it.

But it's hard to believe, isn't it? ...even when you...believe. I don't know about you, but I resonate with what this man says: I believe...but Jesus, help my unbelief.

Because in spite of all that I believe to be true, it's easy to give into cynicism and believe that things are bad and just gonna get worse, and there is no hope. That what Jesus promised, and what we pray for every Sunday when we say the words to the Lord's Prayer, is but a dream, or at the most a promise only fulfilled after all is dead and gone.

But for this world we live in now, for this life--is there any hope?

You can see why the man responded like he did to Jesus. After living with a son suffering from such a terrible illness for so long--it's amazing the man hadn't completely given up on belief.

But Jesus sees something more in the world. Later, when his disciples ask him about it all, and why they couldn't cast out the demon, Jesus tells the disciples, "This kind can only come out through prayer."

And, I'll be honest--I have no idea what Jesus is talking about. But here's what I think Jesus is saying. He's not giving us some secret prayer formula--just say this prayer and good things will happen. But he's pointing us to the very heart of being a disciple of Christ, and that is prayer--which is the language of a disciple. Prayer is hope--hope in the midst of despair. Prayer is seeking a way through, when there is no way. Prayer is choosing to believe, even when you don't.

The kind of demons that possess our world--these kind of demons can only come out by prayer. Not cynicism, but prayer--trusting that in the midst of the face of evil, God is working something beautiful and new. Prayer--believing that God is always more powerful than the evil we face.

This is the good news we proclaim: but do we believe it?

It seems everywhere store you go in lately: Target, Walmart, Hobby Lobby--everyone is selling something with this quote emblazoned on it: "Believe there is good in the world." I tried to find the source of the quote, if there was some famous person who first said it. I couldn't. But I did find this quote from Anne Frank which may be where it comes from.

You remember Anne Frank. We all read in grade school her *Diary of a Young Girl*, which she wrote in the 1930s during World War II while she hid with her Jewish family in Amsterdam during the Nazi occupation. She saw a lot. The evil in her world--so much more palatable than what we experience. Yet what was her response?

“In spite of everything I still believe that people are really good at heart. I simply can’t build up my hopes on a foundation consisting of confusion, misery, and death. I see the world gradually being turned into a wilderness, I hear the ever approaching thunder, which will destroy us too, I can feel the sufferings of millions and yet, if I look up into the heavens, I think that it will all come right, that this cruelty too will end, and that peace and tranquility will return again.”

Is there still goodness left in the world? Is there reason to hope? Is there reason to believe? There is so much that would say no. So much evidence to the contrary.

But Jesus asks us today, “Do you believe?” Do you believe that there is good in the world? Do you believe that hate and evil and violence will not win? Do you believe that even death cannot stop God’s love? Do you believe that Jesus, working in this world and using people like us--do you believe that Jesus can change the world?

Your best answer maybe nothing more than a simple honest prayer:
“I believe, Jesus. Help my unbelief.” And that--that is enough. That kind of prayer can cast out demons. That kind of prayer can change the world.

You better believe it.

Amen.