

“Believers Are Inclusive!”

I heard episode 544 of [This American Life](#) on KERA Radio back in January. This episode was titled, “Batman”. It was not about the Caped Crusader. Ira Glass is the host for [This American Life](#). He introduced that program saying, **“So today we have a story that we think might make you believe something that right now you do not believe.”** His guests for the episode were NPR science reporters Alix Spiegel and Lulu Miller.

Among other things, Spiegel and Miller reported on a special study about rats. Spiegel talked about “Bob Rosenthal. He’s a research psychologist. And early in his career, he did this thing. He went into his lab late at night and hung signs on all of the rat cages. And some of the signs said that the rat in the cage was incredibly smart. And some of the signs said that the rat in the cage was incredibly dumb, even though neither of those things was true.”

In the experiment, Rosenthal had two groups of people work with these rats. The persons working with the rats thought they were either very smart or very dumb, even though there was no real difference between the abilities of the two groups of rats. Spiegel shared, “In Bob’s real study, the smart rats did almost twice as well as the dumb rats.” Spiegel explained further, “Yeah, even though the smart rats were not smart and the dumb rats were not dumb. They were all just the same average kind of lab rat.” **“It was so shocking, people didn’t really believe him.”**

Glass asked, “And so what was going on? Like, what was actually happening to make the rats do this?” Spiegel responded, **“So what Bob figured out was that the expectations that the experimenters carried in their heads subtly changed the way that the experimenters touched the rats, and that changed the way that the rats behaved.”** So when the experimenters thought that the rats were really smart, they felt more warmly towards the rats. And so they touched them more gently.”

Glass went on to ask, “And how does this play out when it comes to people? How do our expectations of other people work?” Spiegel answered, **“Well, what you saw in the rats totally holds for people too.”** “I talked to Carol Dweck, who’s a psychologist and researcher at Stanford.” Spiegel continued, “And it happens in all kinds of areas. Research has shown that a teacher’s expectations can raise or lower a student’s IQ score, that a mother’s expectations influences the drinking behavior of her middle schooler, that military trainers’ expectations can literally make a soldier run faster or slower.”

Further into the [This American Life](#) program, the story is told about the Batman for which the episode is titled. Miller asked Rosenthal, “Could my expectations make a blind person who literally has no eyeballs see?” Rosenthal answered, “No way. The expectations will not make him see.” Miller then shares the story of Daniel Kish. Kish is blind and has prosthetic eyes. Miller shares, “Daniel’s eyes had to be removed when he was just a toddler because of cancer.” **Daniel Kish, who is totally blind, is able to move around places, even the outside, as if he is able to see objects!** He demonstrated this ability to Miller while they were taking a hike deep in the woods. Miller shares, “And not only does this allow him to hike – navigate foreign cities alone, rock climb, horseback ride, but the one that gets all the attention is that he can ride a bicycle.” Daniel Kish is called Batman. Miller explains, “Because he is the man who clicks, like a bat.” His clicking enables him to visualize objects and the setting around him. It is a process similar to radar.

Later in the program, Miller says, “And here’s where we get back to expectations. See, Daniel thinks there is nothing amazing about him. He thinks that most blind people who don’t have other disabilities could do things like ride bikes.” Daniel Kish, Batman, believes most blind people don’t fulfill their abilities because of the expectations of sighted people. Most of the time blind persons are strongly discouraged from even attempting to do some of the amazing things Daniel Kish is able to do, even though he has no eyes. Kish says, **“What we are doing is we are creating slaves to others’ thinking. Slaves to others’ perception, slaves to what others think they should be doing. And somehow we’re comfortable with that.”**

I shared a portion of that Batman episode to suggest we treat people, the vast majority of the time, in accordance with our expectations of them, regardless of whether or not our expectations are accurate. Further, **people usually react to our expectations of them by fulfilling our expectations or, put another way, most persons respond to the way we treat them – which we do because of our expectations by acting the way our treatment of them indicates they will respond.**

Our Scripture Reading, from the Gospel of John, documents **Jesus recognized human tendencies are overwhelmingly tied to the fulfillment of expectations.** Unfortunately, many of our expectations of people, especially of folks we do not know, are false – perhaps stereotypes, which are born out of our prejudices. Most of our prejudices are learned from our family, friends, coworkers, community, culture, and even our faith or religion. Jesus knew and knows about all of that and so, he modeled the New Life of true liberation and reconciliation, for his disciples and followers. In today’s text, Jesus raises up our call, as believers – those who follow him – to be inclusive and welcoming of all persons.

This Scripture reveals Jesus’ radical departure from the prejudices of the Jewish Society of about 2,000 years ago. He broke the traditions and cultural norms, which were built on the community’s accumulated experiences and prejudices. Perhaps the most obvious example of how Jesus challenged such expectations was the way he interacted with the outcasts of his society. Our

Reading demonstrates this in the very shocking way Jesus related with the woman he met at the well and with the people of her town.

The story told in this Scripture may well have been excluded by the sources for or by the authors of the Synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke because of its scandalous nature. The Gospel of John includes a significant number of situations where Jesus acted in a way, in which Jewish society would have disapproved. The Synoptic Gospels did not include many of those situations. Today's Text involves several examples of Jesus going against the social norms. Jesus talked to a Samaritan woman at Jacob's well. Jewish men did not talk to unfamiliar women in public, especially Samaritans. Even the Samaritan woman of whom Jesus asked for a drink of water was shocked by Jesus' refusal to fulfill the expectations of his or her societies. **She said in verse 9, "You are a Jew, and I am a Samaritan — so how can you ask me for a drink?"** The author of the Gospel explained, **"(Jews will not use the same cups and bowls that Samaritans use.)"**

Verses 15-18 revealed Jesus mysteriously knew the woman's questionable history. Yet, Jesus continued talking to her, when most respectable Jews would never have talked to such a person. His disciples were especially shocked! They discovered this scene as they rejoined Jesus after buying food in the town. Their prejudice collided with their respect for their Master and they were dumbfounded. The Gospel of John reported in **verse 27, "At that moment Jesus' disciples returned, and they were greatly surprised to find him talking with a woman. But none of them said to her, 'What do you want?' or asked him, 'Why are you talking with her?'"**

Surely, the Samaritan woman recognized the glaring sneers from Jesus' disciples, yet, this extraordinary Reading described the Samaritan woman became an evangelist in **verses 28-29, "Then the woman left her water jar, went back to the town, and said to the people there, 'Come and see the man who told me everything I have ever done. Could he be the Messiah?'"** Because Jesus did not treat the woman as she expected him to, she was liberated from her bondage to the cultural expectations, especially those based on the prejudices of her and his societies.

After the woman declared the Good News about Jesus – about his welcome of her and his inclusive interaction with her, the people returned with her to the well and they begged Jesus to stay with them! They had only known about Jesus through the woman's testimony, which was utterly amazing to them. **Verse 39 reported, "Many of the Samaritans in that town believed in Jesus because the woman had said, 'He told me everything I have ever done.'"** They too were liberated from the prejudicial expectations of theirs and his cultures! Perhaps even more dramatic is the fact Jesus accepted their invitation and stayed with those Samaritans for two days!

After those two days, these social outcasts revealed to the woman in **verse 42, "We believe now, not because of what you said, but because we ourselves have heard him, and we know that he really is the Savior of the world."** After those Samaritans were able to interact with Jesus and to hear his teachings, they were even more transformed – more committed to go against their cultural norms of hatred for the Jews!

Raymond Brown and other scholars believed the Gospel of John was closely related to what they called the Community of the Beloved Disciple. Their descriptions of that community indicate those believers practiced the radical inclusiveness Jesus manifested in our Text. Against Jewish norms, they included Samaritans and other outcasts within the Community of the Beloved Disciple.

Round Grove United Church, United Church of Christ includes in our Mission Statement the commitment to welcome all persons from all backgrounds, even though our culture and society may seek to treat them as outcasts or unlovable sinners. Round Grove United Church seeks to follow Jesus' example of inclusiveness through our welcoming as members and friends of the congregation all persons, regardless of the distinctions and divisions society seeks to impose upon us.

The United Church of Christ and its predecessors were the first to manifest this inclusiveness through the ordaining of women and gay persons. It is a difficult challenge to go against the expectations of our society by having the openness and commitment to be supportive of the inclusiveness demonstrated by Jesus Christ and the Community of the Beloved Disciple. During each generation, Christians are forced to face this issue of going against the expectations and prejudices of society, and to instead, relate with people as they are and to also welcome the unloved, the powerless, the outcasts, and the untouchables. **Let us respond with the same self-giving and sacrificial love Jesus lived, as we welcome and include everyone in the Body of Christ!** Amen.