

**By What Authority**  
**Matthew 21: 23-32**  
**Jon Frost**

The story is told that during the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s in the town of Lebanon, Tennessee, the town mayor visited the jail cell of black activist Mary Hamilton. She, along with several other women, had been arrested for illegal picketing. After condescendingly addressing the women by their first name, Hamilton cut him off and said, “It is Miss Hamilton. And if you don’t know how to speak to a lady, then get out of my cell.” She went on, “And I’ve been in a lot of jails before, but none as filthy as this one!” - at which point the mayor is said to have left the room.

Mary Hamilton went on to win a Supreme Court case against the state of Alabama in 1963, after her lawyers appealed a case in which she had been held in contempt of court for refusing to answer the judge and prosecutor until they addressed her with the honorific “miss,” which would have afforded her the same respect offered to white women. The Supreme Court essentially said that a court could not address black witnesses differently than white ones, a precedent which stands today.

A close friend described Hamilton as “a dashing woman with great authority” and you get the sense from stories about her that she had a way a powerful way of subverting authority, of bringing into question who actually held authority in a given situation, be it a jail cell or courtroom.

“By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” This is the question the chief priests and elders ask Jesus when he entered the temple. To put this scene into context, at the beginning of this chapter Jesus entered Jerusalem - think Palm Sunday. Then he made a huge scene in the temple by driving out the buyers and sellers, overturning tables and chairs, and calling out the religious establishment for turning a house of prayer into a den of robbers.

The blind and the lame came to him and were healed, children were spontaneously singing “Hosanna!” in the streets. It was a crazy scene and people were on edge.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus had clashed with the religious establishment because he consistently positioned himself as one with authority when it came to the core symbols of 1st century Judaism, such as the Torah, Sabbath, food and purity codes, nation, and land. He reinterpreted these symbols in new and, to some, dangerous ways. But now, he is at the epicenter of Jewish religious and political life, the symbol of symbols, the temple.

And so they ask Jesus this question about authority. But is it really the question they want to ask? It seems to me that it's almost like an interrogation, where you can't come right out and ask the question you want or the person will completely disengage. You have to take the circuitous route through leading questions to get the person talking and then maybe you'll get an answer for the question you really want to ask.

And it seems that what these authorities really want to ask Jesus is "who do you think you are?" "You come in here like you own the joint when none of us, who actually have authority in this place, have granted you a thing." What they really want to know is if Jesus believes he is the Messiah, God's anointed, because only the Messiah would have greater authority than the chief priests and the right to take possession of the temple, as Jesus has seemed to do.

Jesus is up for their game. By lobbing a question back to them, he traps them in their attempt to trap him. "Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?", Jesus asked. They couldn't legitimize John's ministry because they'd have to then explain why they rejected his message. But they also couldn't condemn him because of the favor in which he was held by the crowds.

So it all builds to this crescendo and their response, "we don't know," to which Jesus responds, "well then I'm not going to answer your question either." It's a great scene!

But, seizing the momentum, Jesus continues with this parable of two sons. The father tells the sons to go work in the vineyard. One tells the father he will not go work in the vineyard but then changes his mind and goes. The other says he will go but doesn't. Obviously, the one who ultimately went to work in the vineyard did the will of the father. They couldn't possibly have been ready for what Jesus said next. "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you."

And verse 32, which has really captured my attention: "For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him." It's this phrase "even after you saw it" that intrigues me. It's one thing to have given a hard pass on the message of John. But then, to see tax collectors and prostitutes change their minds, repent in other words; surely that would be a sign that the kingdom of God was among them, right? But no, even after seeing those on the margins welcomed, after seeing those supposedly too far gone turn their life in a new direction, they remain unmoved.

Their vision of what it would look like when the Messiah came on the scene lacked imagination. Because here was Jesus, ushering in the kingdom, which was good news especially to those on the margins, and they couldn't see it. But you know, a lot of times we don't see it either. In Jesus we are invited, as New Testament scholar Stan Saunders writes, to imagine a world where human beings can walk on water; where thousands are fed with just a little bit of bread and fish; where enemies are reconciled; where the economy is driven by abundance, not scarcity; where the religiously and

politically powerful are bested by an unarmed healer from the backwaters of Galilee. "If you can imagine this kind of world, Saunders continues, "you possess the kind of imagination the evangelist Matthew sought to instill among Christians at the end of the 1st century - an imagination ready to discern the kingdom of heaven."

It is no wonder why the tax collectors, prostitutes, and others on the margins are the most ready to embrace first John's and then Jesus' message. They have no stake in the present reality so news that there is another world possible is not just good news, it is the best news. But it is those with something at stake in the present world who seem to have the hardest time imagining any alternative.

So it's nice to periodically have our imaginations jumpstarted. Many of us on the staff have been inspired by a movement in which churches of many different denominations have become involved. The most recent story, which pastor Jennie Clark circulated, told about how five faith communities in southern Minnesota worked together to clear over two million dollars in medical debt for over 1,000 households in Minnesota and Wisconsin. And they did it by reaching a fundraising goal of \$15,000. Wait, what? How could they erase millions of dollars of debt with just \$15,000 dollars? I wondered the same thing.

They, and many other faith communities like them, partnered with a New York based non profit called RIP Medical Debt. What this organization does is purchase medical debt in bulk at a fraction of its original cost. This enables the debt to be erased for pennies on the dollar. They target debt portfolios of individuals at or near the poverty line and when the debt is erased those individuals receive forgiveness notices letting them know their debt is gone.

Can you imagine?

"By what authority are you doing these things?" they asked of Jesus. Wouldn't it be great if, as the Church, our strangeness in the world, caused people to ask those kinds of questions about us? What compels you to love your neighbor? Why throw money away on medical debt? Why advocate for justice for those on the margins? Why write letters to the imprisoned? Why try to tackle issues like racism, addiction, human trafficking, and affordable housing? By what authority are you doing these things?

Just maybe we'll say, "by the authority of the one to whom all authority in heaven and earth has been given; the one who was a friend of sinners and outcasts, of whom they said was a glutton and a drunkard because of the company he kept, the one who called broken and flawed disciples and continues to call you and me with all that we are and all that we have to join the ranks of sinners and saints working in his vineyard, toiling for his kingdom.

Amen.

## **Resources**

Mary Hamilton Story

<https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2017/11/30/567177501/when-miss-meant-so-much-more-how-one-woman-fought-alabama-and-won>

Medical Debt Story

[https://pres-outlook.org/2020/09/five-churches-complete-mission-to-clear-millions-in-medical-debt-for-more-than-1000-households-in-minnesota-and-wisconsin/?fbclid=IwAR0JYD\\_poMwq3yDk4qU1pMTzQfo7jLGN86Rr1OzT\\_Zp1uDvHlajWIBzcbM](https://pres-outlook.org/2020/09/five-churches-complete-mission-to-clear-millions-in-medical-debt-for-more-than-1000-households-in-minnesota-and-wisconsin/?fbclid=IwAR0JYD_poMwq3yDk4qU1pMTzQfo7jLGN86Rr1OzT_Zp1uDvHlajWIBzcbM)

Stan Saunders Article

<https://sojo.net/sojoshare/Mzc2OXwyMDEyNTZ8MTYwMTMyMTczNXw1>