

## “Alice Paul: Sometimes You Have to Make People Mad”

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Isaiah 50: 4-5, 7; A letter by Alice Paul (written in 1917); Matthew 21: 12-13

Sometimes you just have to make people mad.

One of my favorite books when I was in high school was JD Salinger’s *Franny and Zooey*. At one point, *Zooey* reminds *Franny* of her childhood response to reading the Gospel, when she declared she didn’t like Jesus any more: “You didn’t approve of his going into the synagogue and throwing all the tables and idols all over the place. That was very rude, very Unnecessary.”

But we know that Jesus was not tame and domesticated, safe and cautious. And what he did – both in the temple and in confronting power – made people mad.

And today’s saint, Alice Paul, also created anger and controversy. Some of you may already be familiar with her – she’s long been a hero of mine - but I’d like to share a bit about her early life.

She was born in 1885, in a prosperous Quaker family. After graduating from Swarthmore in 1905, and beginning a career as a social worker, she was offered the opportunity to study in England, where she joined the militant suffrage organization, the Women’s Social and Political Union. Their tactics were controversial – they threw stones at government buildings, they bombed mailboxes, they burned unoccupied houses. And they went to prison, where they introduced England to the hunger strike, which led to force-feeding.

In 1912, Paul returned to the United States. The US suffrage movement, led by the National American Woman Suffrage Association, had been concentrating on winning suffrage state-by-state, but had met with only limited success. Paul became the architect of a plan to pass a Constitutional amendment that would guarantee on a federal level the right to vote. After resistance from the NAWSA, and in opposition to its leadership, Paul formed an independent group, the National Woman’s Party, and succeeded in introducing an amendment – which was referred to committee.

Impatient with the failure of Congress to get the “Anthony Amendment” out of committee, and with the lack of support shown by Woodrow Wilson, in 1917, the National Woman’s Party began picketing the White House. Theirs was the first picket the White House had experienced, and many thought it disloyal and unpatriotic – oh, and unfeminine and unladylike. After the entrance of the US into WWI, the “silent sentinels,” as they were called, refused to cease their action. Instead, they marched with banners that decried fighting for democracy in

Europe while denying democracy to women at home. They were often attacked by infuriated passersby. Rather than protecting the women, the authorities instead arrested them for obstructing traffic and inciting violence. In November of 1917, Paul and several others who were imprisoned began a hunger strike, and she and her colleagues were force-fed, leading to long-term damage to Paul’s health.

The non-violent but assertive tactics of the NWP led to heightened visibility of the issue, and to considerable backlash, both from the public and from the President. Wilson repeatedly refused to meet with the leadership of the National Woman’s Party, preferring instead to deal with the less militant, more “reasonable” National American Woman Suffrage Association, but there is no doubt that his willingness to work with the NAWSA was based at least in part by the threat of the National Woman’s Party.

In 1919, Congress, with Wilson’s support, passed the amendment. Efforts to win state ratification were ramped up by both the NWP and the NASWA. When Tennessee, the last state needed to ratify the amendment, was set to vote in August of 1920, suffrage workers from around the country converged on Nashville. But Alice Paul stayed in Washington. Knowing that her presence would be controversial and inflammatory, she feared that she might endanger passage of the amendment. Paul’s tactics had been too controversial in her day – she made people mad – and she recognized there was a price to be paid – but she was willing to pay it for the sake of the right to vote. (And my grandmother, at the age of 25, went to the polls for the first time, at least in part because of Alice Paul.)

The evidence of the Republican presidential debates notwithstanding, many of us – both men and women – are socialized to be “nice,” to not rock the boat, to work quietly even when we try to correct injustices. But sometimes, justice requires that we have to make people mad. This isn’t easy for most of us. But it’s sometimes necessary. Let me add a caveat: we have to pick our battles, and ask ourselves hard questions before we move – is this issue really about justice, does it really warrant such behavior, am I engaging in this action – and this may be key – because it satisfies a personal need to hurt someone, to make them suffer in retaliation for our own pain? This is not permission to ride roughshod over everyone in our way, to inflict pain needlessly, to be deliberately hurtful.

But once we have answered those questions honestly, the issues involved may mean that we may need to act. We don't act alone, however – Isaiah reminds us that our strength, our words, our resolve come from God. Many years ago, when I lived in Rhode Island, I was part of a group that worked on gender issues within the Catholic Church. After prayer vigils outside the cathedral on Maundy Thursday, when the Catholic Church celebrates the institution of the priesthood, we decided that we were going to up the ante, to go inside the cathedral during the Mass, and to stand throughout the Mass in silent protest, wearing purple stoles, the international sign of women's ordination. I was in charge of this action, and I was scared to death – I knew that, although some present might support us, more would be angry and upset. Confessing my fear to a colleague, she gave me the reading we heard from Isaiah, and whispering the words to myself like a mantra as I entered the cathedral, I was able, in that moment, to remember, “Our God helps me, therefore I have set my face like flint against them.”

So sometimes, when we are confronted by injustice, by social wrongs, by injury done to the poor, the weak or the marginal by those in power, we may need to make people mad. And sometimes those whom we anger will not understand our actions, just as we might question the actions of others. Yes, sometimes, we are the people who are being made mad, and when that happens, we need to try to look past the actions that draw our anger to the motivation of those who are protesting, or to the results of their actions. I think of the rioters in Ferguson – would Americans have been quite so aware of the systemic issues that were involved had we not also seen violence in response to those actions? It's a difficult line to negotiate, and, like most human endeavors, it's rarely done perfectly.

The struggle for justice is complex. Sometimes it is fought over the kitchen table, sometimes it is found in City Hall, and sometimes it's messy and even morally ambiguous. And sometimes, sometimes, just as Alice Paul did, you have to make people mad. When we are called to do that, may we examine our motives, and if they are worthy, and with the help of God, set our faces like flint.