

In Memory of Joan Wilson

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Text: Psalm 23

Maybe it is something with which we are just born—some people have it, some not. Or maybe it is something that grows in us from a small seed to a mature reality. But from wherever it comes, the ability to empathize with people who are struggling, people who have been victims, people who have enormous but untapped potential, wherever it comes from, it is all too rare in the world.

Therefore when we see it we should stand back in awe—the way we do when we watched the first human walk on the moon, when we stand before a painting by Rembrandt, or watch an Olympic athlete complete a perfect dive. We have to recognize empathy, true soul-deep empathy, for what it is—a form of greatness. And friends, we saw it in Joan Wilson.

Many people I have known who possess this type of greatness have some source of pain in their own lives. But instead of complaining about the pain, they embrace it. As they do so, they are able to embrace other people's pain as well. It is all very mysterious, magical but as real as anything we experience in life.

And the effect, impact it has on others is transformative. For in the presence of an empathetic person, the person who is suffering, who is dispossessed or disenfranchised, suddenly realizes that he or she is understood. They say to themselves, "She gets it. She understands my pain." And as they are understood, they are also liberated—freed from the shackles of being misunderstood, unappreciated, overlooked or ignored.

George Wilson, Joan's husband of one-half a century, wrote to me, "Joan seemed to be born with a sense of mission about helping any person or any animal who needed help. She sensed their needs and addressed them quietly, effectively, nobly. She never sought credit for her good works. She considered helping others as natural and as necessary as breathing. Others sensed this caring." Yes, they did. I sensed it within minutes of meeting her. My guess is that each of you did as well.

It is not an accident that Joan's favorite piece of Scripture was the 23rd Psalm which we just heard. For the 23rd Psalm describes an empathetic God. "Yea, even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for thou art with me." Isn't that the essence of empathy? Somebody is with us. They understand we are afraid and yet they don't bail out on us. They walk with us. "Your rod and staff, they comfort me." Another characteristic of empathy: we are comforted by those who choose to walk with us.

We just finished the seasons of Advent and Christmas in which we talk about God as Emmanuel. Literally, Emmanuel is translated into English as "God with us." When we are with one another, when we present to one another, we are acting in God's image.

We loved Joan Wilson for a thousand different reasons. But underlying them all was her ability to be present for us, with us, to us. And if I have learned anything in my 58 years of life, I have learned that death can't touch that kind of relationship. Joan is as present to us today as she was last year, ten years ago, fifty years. Her empathetic, loving, supportive presence will be with us until our day to die arrives. For such a gift, an astounding, sacred gift, we give thanks to God. And as a tribute to her, may we use the healing power of empathy in the way we relate to one another.