

## **There's a Rabbit in My Engine**

Text: Hebrews 11:8-16

*Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on March 7, 2021*

Last Saturday was a harrowing day for me. One of my cats, Mr. Tux, had been throwing up daily for almost a week. He was getting dehydrated and refusing to eat, so I tried to make an appointment with a local vet many of you had recommended. Due to Covid, however, they were not taking any new animals and they sent me to an urgent care clinic in Watertown. I got an appointment for 4 pm.

I was dreading the process of getting Tux into his carrier, but since he was so lethargic anyway, he was in before he knew what hit him. But he quickly figured it out, and began to reveal his displeasure before we were even out the door. No matter, I was prepared for the yowling. Into the car he went. I got in and hit the start button. Nada. The battery was dead. So now the cat is yowling and I can't begin the half-hour trip. Already stressed about his condition, I didn't want to wait for AAA, so I began sending text messages to people who lived nearby. "Can you jump a car?"

It was Sherry who responded, "On my way" and was quickly on the scene. But with covers over all the engine parts in her car, neither of us could actually find the battery. Back to the phone to watch a YouTube video on where to find the battery in her make and model of car. We waited through some banter from the friendly Texan giving the instructions, but finally we got it, pulled off the right cover, and found the battery. The battery with the totally corroded terminal.

We tried it anyway. Didn't work. Did I mention it was raining?

Sherry is a hero in my book in part because she simply does not give up until a problem is solved; so she called Bill to come with his car, which he promptly did, even as I also called AAA for yet another backup. I was already going to be late for my 4 pm. Tux was still complaining about his confinement.

Bill beat AAA to the scene, and jumped the car. Success! As he was removing the jumper cables and I was preparing to leave, he cried, "Wait!" He seemed troubled and yelled to me "There's a rabbit in your engine!" I knew that couldn't be right, so I rolled down the window to hear him better. "What?"

"There's a rabbit in your engine!"

"What??? Is it...alive?"

"Yes! I can see its eyes down in the corner."

So now it's total chaos. The car is running. The cat is yowling. Sherry and Bill are both pulling brushes and things with long handles out of their cars to stand in the rain and try to get the rabbit out to safety. At long last the rabbit becomes the energizer bunny, jumps out, and runs away. Sherry senses—correctly, I might add—that I'm about to fly into a million pieces, pats me on the shoulder and says, "It's all fine now. The bunny is okay." With shaking fingers, I dial the urgent care place because it's now after 4:30 and I've missed my appointment time. They could still take me, so off I go with Tux, who is still not pleased to have been in a crate in a cold car for an hour. I deliver him to urgent care, handing him over in his carrier at the door, since I can't go in.

I sit in the car, which is still running so the battery won't die, for an hour and a half; order takeout from the restaurant across the street but have them deliver it to the parking lot since I can't shut off the car, and wait for the vet to call me. She gives him nausea meds and tells me to meet the tech at the door to get him back. I take the carrier, turn to head toward the car, and see Tux halfway out the front of the carrier because they forgot to zip the front flap when bringing him to me. I grab Tux so that he's not loose

in a parking lot by a busy intersection in a strange city in the dark and, with hands shaking, zip him back into the carrier and get him back into the running car. We're both exhausted, but he's still not happy about either the carrier or the car and yowls all the way home. He's fine now, and I took salad greens and put them out in the bushes for the rabbit. The end.

I have spent the time to tell that story, both because I'm still traumatized by the thought of chasing Tux around Watertown in the dark and because it has a number of things to teach us about this week's fruit of the Spirit, which is...patience.

To begin with, never pray for patience unless you really mean it, and certainly be prepared if you get a foolhardy idea like trying to preach about it. Patience is something that is cultivated only by being thrust into situations where patience is necessary, which are not fun places to be. In Romans 12:12, Paul tells us to be patient in affliction, which is a clue to when patience is called for. If everything is smooth sailing, you can't practice patience, and practice is the only way to get it. If you ask God for patience, the only way for God to grant that request is to repeatedly give you frustrating circumstances where you can practice—first with small frustrations, and then as we master those, the challenges grow until we're able to deal with the worst life can throw at us. So, be careful what you pray for!

Secondly, as I sat for an hour and a half in a parking lot with my engine running and tried to process hearing the words, "There's a rabbit in your engine," I began to see that it was a perfect metaphor for what happens when we don't have patience. We need or want something—in the case of the rabbit it was a place to escape the cold wind and rain—and we rush to the first thing that seems to fit the bill without thinking. That can make our initial problem worse and, in some cases, can even get us killed.

Patience is the thing that keeps us from jumping from the frying pan into the fire—or from the rain into a car engine. Patience is what keeps us from flipping off the guy who cut us off in traffic. When we're patient, we have the presence of mind to realize that, in cutting us off, he has shown his own impatience, putting him in an unstable state and therefore less able to deal with someone showing hostility. Our impatience with his impatience might lead him to ram our car or pull out a gun, which then could land him in jail and make our day considerably worse if not deadly. No one wins in the game of impatience.

But we need to understand that patience is different than just waiting. If you've ever stood in a long line at a store, you'll know that while everyone is waiting, not everyone is patient. Some leave the line entirely and refuse to wait, even if staying in line will give them what they got in line for in the first place. But of those who remain, some are constantly complaining, trying to jump the line, or making the lives of those around them miserable; while others just hang out, chat, or find some way to bide their time until their turn comes around.

Patience is not just waiting; it's about *how* we wait. Patience is the ability to soothe our inner rabbit so that we don't just jump into a car engine. With the rabbit at peace, we can survey our options and make wise decisions about when, where, or even if we jump. Ironically, there are times when patience specifically leads us *not* to wait. In our example of people standing in line at the store, those who leave the line might be impatient. But they also might be masters of patience. Their ability to stay calm in a frustrating situation could allow them to quickly decide that whatever they were in line for was less important than another use of their time and leave, not in a huff, but in perfect peace about their decision.

But let's up the stakes a bit here. Patience is an active choice that we make to calm ourselves in a frustrating and difficult situation. That choice can't be forced. But, while no one can force us to be *patient*, we frequently are forced to *wait*—either by outside forces or by our own circumstances. Waiting on the

Covid vaccine is a good case in point, as we encounter both kinds of forced waiting. On the one hand, there are the external forces of having to wait until the state says we qualify to get it. The state, in turn, is forced to wait to offer it to everyone until they can get the supply they need. But even if we qualify, there are still instances where people are facing a long wait and a frustrating process, either to get an appointment or to stand in line to get the shot. When you're a person with high risk factors for contracting Covid, giving up and leaving the line or stopping the attempts to get an appointment aren't really an option. You need the vaccine. You have internal concerns forcing you to wait and external forces making that wait long and frustrating.

When waiting is forced—by external or internal forces or both—our rabbit gets jittery very quickly, which puts us at risk of ending up inside an engine. In the example of the vaccine, if we can't calm the rabbit as we try to navigate getting an appointment, we might risk our lives by giving up on getting the vaccine entirely. Being able not just to wait but to wait patiently can literally make the difference between life and death. So how do we become patient when the rabbit is freaking out?

We can quickly see that the other fruit of the Spirit we've already talked about come in handy here. Patience requires the meek spirit of humility that doesn't presume we should be given preference over others. It needs the kindness and generosity of heart that, in the example of waiting for the vaccine, empathizes with health care workers and recognizes that they are doing the best they can in unprecedented circumstances. We need self-control to keep our tongues in check when we're upset. We need the faith that our turn will come if we wait, and that saving lives is worth it.

Well, that's all well and good, but suppose I'm not very good at any of that? What if I jump in the engine every single time and can't seem to help myself? Excellent question; and the answer is that the crazy notion that everyone should just pull themselves up by their own bootstraps is nonsense. From the time Jesus called twelve others to live and watch and travel and learn with him until today, the Christian way has been not to go it alone. Even if we technically *can*, we shouldn't. Jesus didn't begin his ministry until he formed a community around him. We are meant to learn, live, grow, and eventually thrive in loving community. We have come to call the Christian version of that community "church," although too many churches today have forgotten, twisted, or flat out abandoned that critical role.

Last Saturday, when I was paralyzed by what I felt was a choice between the health of Mr. Tux and the life of a scared rabbit in my engine, Sherry immediately sensed my struggle, came to the car window, put her hand on my shoulder and provided words of comfort. After freeing the literal rabbit, she soothed my inner rabbit when I could not, which allowed me to drive safely to Watertown and get Tux the help he needed. In that moment, Sherry stood in for every one of you. She was the church, doing what the church does, when we're at our best.

To produce the fruit of the Spirit in full measure requires a community that also values those virtues. If we have that, we can risk turning the other cheek, forgiving someone, humbly allowing the last to go first, and trying a bit of patience because we know that someone else will have the presence of mind to notice if there's a rabbit in our engine when we ourselves have no idea. In real Christian community, the cycle of give and take; of giving what we get and getting what we give—forgive us our debts *as we forgive* our debtors—stops sounding like judgment and starts to feel like salvation. It takes a village to soothe a rabbit.

The last point I want to make about patience is a warning not to kill the rabbit. The rabbit inside us, poised to jump, is not the thing preventing us from being patient. In fact, the ability to jump quickly when necessary is a rabbit's main defense. If our tendency is to jump too quickly, the answer is not to cut

off our legs. Patience is the virtue that settles us down enough to evaluate whether the jump we're considering is a good idea. Patience is a form of peace—it's calming the rabbit, not killing the rabbit, so we can make wise decisions while preserving the ability to act when and as quickly as necessary.

While it's true that patience frequently involves waiting; it's active waiting, strategic waiting, and in the Christian context, it's faithful waiting. It's not just sitting around waiting for God to fix something. If I had done that last Saturday, I'd still be sitting with a yowling cat in the church parking lot. Patience is doing what we can to live a life directed by the Spirit rather than a life directed by the whims, emotions, and fears of the moment. Sometimes we can do that on our own, but there will always come a day when we have met our match and we find ourselves stuck inside a roaring engine.

We all need a community of those who share our values—who agree that the fruit of the Spirit are desirable things and who are committed to giving and receiving the help that can produce the fruit in all of us together. We can get there; it just may take a little patience. Amen.