

9/5/09

"Saturday's Child..."

Text: "We must work the works of him
who sent me, while it is day,
for the night comes, when
no one can work." John 9:4

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I assume most of you know the little Nursery Rhyme poem which designates the kind of life and circumstances which will befall you, depending on the day of the week on which you were born. You may repeat it with me if you do:

"Monday's child is fair of face,
Tuesday's child is full of grace.
Wednesday's child is full of woe,
Thursday's child has far to go.
Friday's child is loving and giving,
Saturday's child works hard for his living.
But the child that is born on the Sabbath day
"Is good and wise and fair and gay."

It has an illustrious and venerable past. It first was first published in 1838, as part of A.E. Bray's "Traditions of Devonshire." But it had been part of the folklore in and around Suffolk, England, as far back as 1527. It varied a little when it crossed the Atlantic Ocean: Harper's Magazine published a slightly revised version in 1887. And it kept on going. David Gates' song "Saturday's Child," was recorded by The Monkees in 1966, which seems like only yesterday. David Bowie recorded another version in 1999. And I now, as a Johnny-Come-Lately, bring it to you on Labor Day week-end, 2009: "Saturday's Child."

While we were growing up in Pittsburgh, Mother Cromie used to sing-song it around the house, always memorable because when she came to the Sabbath Day, she would smile and emphasize with a measured cadence, "But the child that is born on the Sabbath Day ... is good ... and wise ... and fair ... and gay!" That was the day that she was born. All Sundays' children rise up and take a bow.

I do not know if you know which day of the week on which you were born. Almost no one does and I have discovered that most people don't even want to know. But that has never held a preacher back so I bash on. I alert you however that it might valuable to you for some grand treasure could be waiting for you. If you want to play along, I offer you a formula which I memorized as a child: Take the year of your birth, add to it the number of the day on which you were born, add to that a prefigured mathematical number, (not forgetting leap year) divide the total by 7, and presto, you will know the day of your birth. The integer numerals for the twelve months by the way, are 8-9-9-6-9-4-6-2-5-0-3-5. (You

see, you can learn a lot of stuff here at Sharon if you listen.) If all that is too much trouble, just hop on your computer, click on Monday's Child, and when you enter the date of your birth, those unseen little fairy folk out in cyber-space will compute it for you. Easier still, just pretend. -If you feel loving and giving, tell people you were born on Friday. If you're having a hard time, choose Wednesday. If you need a nice boost, choose Sunday. It won't mean much unless you are a believer in things like Astrology and bio-rhythms and fortune tellers, psychic readers and Tarot Cards. But if you are, go for it!

I am often surprised and intrigued by friends who believe in Astrology. I have never had much interest myself. But, they tell me that I am the perfect Aries, born under the Zodiac sign of the Ram! They say it is why I am confident, or bossy, even stubborn - depending on who you are talking to. Some have told me that my Peggy and I are "incompatible" as man and wife in the annals of the Horoscope predictions of who should marry whom. The Aires and Leo Fires can spark some marvelous creativity (Did you hear that honey?) but they are potentially explosive due to greater solar influences. You can live without knowing these things, or course, but it might be a hidden bonanza if you discovered that your spouse is the way he is because he was born under an opposite sign and not because of you, as he says.

A couple of weeks ago my horoscope advised me to "Try a new love relationship..." That sounded exciting, old as I am; but since Peggy and I were preparing for our Golden Wedding Anniversary at the time, which took place last Wednesday by the way, capped with a grand and marvelous family dinner uptown last night, stretch limo and all, I decided to postpone the pursuit of a new relationship and continued on to enjoy the Golden Girl I already have.

I do not mean to offend those of you who are astrologically inclined. This world is filled with troubles and woe and penury, so anything that works for you is fine with me. If it gets you through the night, it is alright with me. I do get a little puzzled however when I come across Christians who know more about their horoscopes than they know about their Bible. Except for "Dear Abby" and her kin, the most widely read column in the daily news-paper - and now online - is the Daily Horoscope.

But, back to the train of thought in this introduction to our sermon, if there was one. I was

born on a Thursday. The Rhyme says that "Thursday's child has far to go." Oh dear! They sure got that one right. I would be the first to say that I have a far piece to go, and not too many more years to get there. I don't mind knowing it, but I do mind a little when other people find it out, and tell me. The older I get, the more I am aware of the things I should have settled. When the formal prayer of confession speaks of the "Things we have done and the things we ought not to have done," I tremble a little in my private confessional booth.

I say to the younger of you listening that you learn some things as you grow older, but that it really does not get any easier. It might look like we have made it, because we appear to be all grown up, but mainly it means that we have learned how to conceal our befuddlement - some of the time anyway. The primary reason is that the same person travels along inside of you. I still feel like I am thirty inside. Most of the foibles and failures I had thirty years ago have hung on and still follow me around today. The main problem is that the inner child of your past refuses maintains control of part of you anyway. They say you learn from experience, but I am not always sure. I still do some dumb things. My Dad once told me of the man who bragged that he had 30 years experience in his work, which entitled him to be the boss. Dad said that it was more like he had one year's experience, 30 times over! We still get too soon oldt and too late schmardt! "Thursday's child has far to go!"

But that is a sermon for another day. I am preaching today on "Saturday's Child, remember, "the one who works hard for his living." A large number of people do work hard in our world, whether they were born on a Saturday or not. I want to hold hands with them for a wee while this morning. I sometimes think it is about evenly divided between those who work too hard and those who hardly work at all. Not too many seem to drift to and fro in the middle. A long ago we outlawed overwork for children more than a century and one half ago. Little children were forced to work 14 hours a day, seven days a week. That is against the law of course, but there seems to be no law against forcing some people to work those kinds of hours.

Like I think of a single mother with four children who holds down three jobs, two part time, and of course, her husband is nowhere on payday. She has to have three jobs, two part time. When her second waitressing chores are over she hurries home to clean the house,

and take on her roles as parent, counselor and chauffeur, all the while trying to pay her bills. Of course her derelict husband is no where to be seen. You know what I mean: Life is difficult for many. I think of them who live from pay day to pay day and fall deeper in debt; and I pray for all of them this Labor Day week-end. And I ask you to think of them and pray for them too. Saturday's child works hard for a living.

Once in a while when I talk to laborers and roofers and gardeners, and construction teams who work in the hot sun all day long. I pray for their safety and equilibrium. I think of the police and firemen and those who answer the calls to 911. The thought of doing their job overwhelms me. It's dangerous, often frightful and heartbreaking. By the way, that is a trigger for my prayers: every time I hear a sirens whirring and see vehicles racing down the road, I automatically pause and pray for them and for the ones they are rushing to help.

I also think of the minions who work at MacDonald's or Burger King or automobile service employees or department and variety store clerks and those who work in convenience stores alone at night. I include in my prayers Church Secretaries and Janitors and receptionists and all the other non profit employees who labor for next to nothing and still, with all they seek to do to help, in our current crisis they are still being laid off by the hundreds. It isn't right! I thank God they are there; we couldn't do without them. One I talked to the other day is not encountering unbelievable financial struggles personally, but still was weeping as she told me of those she could no longer help. The world is out of joint.

And I know shopkeepers and small entrepreneurs who with the help of their families, keep their places of business open 12-16 hours a day, six, seven days a week, and still struggle to make ends meet. God bless them. I could go on all day, but you know the rest of the story. I pray God to take care of all of them, that the Lord God will make the end result worth it for you and those you love. Saturday's Child works hard for his living!

Oddly, others choose to work hard for their living. They are wedded to their occupation. Their job is what matters most. Their one goal is getting the next promotion and the inner feeling of power. It amazes me. I have known tons of otherwise perfectly sane and sober people who have all the money in the world, and they still prefer their jobs to their families. I still hear of husbands who work all day and worry about what they will do tomorrow all

evening long. One prominent psychologist diagnosed the problem decades ago, defining the workaholic as one who has a disease of finding his soul in his job. Work can be as addictive as alcohol or drugs.

Go another step with me, if you will. It might sound a little sentimental, but since when is sentiment ruled out of our parlance. I am often there when life rounds its final corner. I have knelt at the deathbeds of a couple of hundred people. I have been privileged to listen to those who, trusting their pastor, reflect honestly on all that happened, and all that didn't. I have never met anyone near the end of the road who wished that he or she had spent more time at the office, or making more calls. The regrets are more personal, like, "I wish I had spent more time with my family." Or "I wish I had learned a foreign language or I wish I had quit smoking or eating." Or, "I wish I had learned to appreciate my wife earlier." Or, "I wish I had spent more time seeking a closer walk with Jesus Christ." "I should have gone fishing more, and I forgot to take my children and grandchildren to see the National Parks and Monuments which make America great." Whatever..."Where is the life I have lost in the living?"

"Saturday's Child works hard for his living." Let those who have ears listen to what the pastor says. I was overly fretful one autumn early in my ministry. My parents were overly successful in teaching me how to work. Well, I had been called to a new Congregation and things were not moving quickly enough. So, I upped the tempo, screeched my sermon a little louder and broadened the goals. I called on the elders and members to take up some extra cudgels and dig the trenches a little deeper and build the ramparts a little higher. Some responded; some didn't, just like elders have a tendency to do.

Then one who became my friend took me aside and said quietly "Now Rev. Cromie, look, this Church was here long before you came and it will likely still be here long after you are gone. Relax; you are supposed to teach us how to trust in God. Why don't you show us how to let him direct the work of his kingdom?" You and I are called to serve and love the Church and all the needy children of the world, but, for God's sake and for the sake of those who love you, don't lose yourself in the process. Don't bury yourself in your work. It is not worth it. You can gain the whole world, but you will lose your own soul.

If you had your life to live over, what would you change? Arnold Palmer will turn 80 this coming Tuesday and is still swinging, the golf clubs I mean. They asked him once that if he had it all to do over, was there anything he would want to change? "Nothing," he replied, "Nothing at all." Then he paused and with that little western Pennsylvanian twinkle he muttered, "Well, there might be a few putts I would like to have over, but nothing more than that."

When she turned 85, Nadine Starr wrote a little poem called, "If I had my to live over.

If I had my life to live over,
I would make more mistakes.
I would relax and limber up.
I would be sillier than I have been this time around.
I would take fewer things seriously.
I would climb more mountains, swim more rivers, and watch more sunsets.
I would eat more ice cream and fewer vegetables.
I would have fewer imaginary troubles.

If I had it to do it over, I would travel lighter.
I would start going barefoot earlier in the spring.
I wouldn't make such good grades, except by accident.
I would have more sweethearts.
I would dance and I would sing more songs and I would play more games.
I would ride more merry-go-rounds.
I would pick more daisies, and I would have more fun!

II. Some work too hard, or give that impression anyway. At the opposite end are those who hardly work at all. The Bible is very hard on people who are capable but refuse to work. It is not popular with the "do-gooders" of our times, but II Thessalonians 3:10 says bluntly: "If a man will not work, let him not eat." That's sounds brutal. I have always felt that Thessalonians does not mean it literally, but we often miss the point. Some people are hungry and homeless out of the misfortunes of the earth, God bless them. But others are lazy and self centered and continually looking for a handout.

One evening years ago I invited some homeless people we served to come to a congregational dinner and give a little talk. I thought it would be good for the church folk to

meet and listen to the homeless. It was grand for they discovered that most of those in trouble were just the same as everybody else, except they might have some kind of emotional disability or they were just plain unlucky.

But I was dumbfounded when the first man stood up and announced that he had been homeless for over 43 years. "Me and my dogs," he bragged, both pedigreed Labradors, "We have lived in tents and shelters for over four decades. We stay down here, in South Florida, where I was pastor then, for 6 months or so; then we hike up to the Northeast for the other six months. He smoked a lot and drank, I could tell. I would have laughed out loud except it was so ridiculous. Some of God's children fall on hard times and cannot find work, but others are homeless because they decide to be that way. We need to distinguish between the two. The hungry are not necessarily heroes.

I like the proposed reforms in the welfare system that are coming from our new administration. Surely we have allowed an increasing number of God's children to fall outside the goodness of the land. That is entirely regrettable and a disgrace in the land of the free and the home of the brave. "Give me you're tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to be free." is still the welcoming watchword of our nation. That's elementary, my dear Watson. But, I mean, an honest day's labor is blessed of God. Being on the perennial dole is not. Being so lazy you will not accept employment, or being so fussy you will not accept menial tasks, is a curse.

There were contrasting views back in Bible times regarding manual labor. In the Greek society, work was left to slaves and the lower classes. The perfect man according to Aristotle would never stoop to soil his hands. In the Scriptures, it is just the opposite. There is a divine command regarding labor from which no one is exempt. Idle folk are bitterly denounced. "Six days shall thou labor and do all thy work," is a prelude to the command to rest on the Sabbath Day. But, it is a command, not an option. The prescribed rest is to follow honest labor.

Think of the way Jesus chose to live on earth. If given the choice, you and I would most likely have chosen to come down to earth as Kings and Queens. That was we would have the power to change the world. But in Philipians it says that when Jesus had the choice,

that he chose to take on the form of a servant. He chose to be born into a working class family. For most of his life he worked as a carpenter in a small family shop in Nazareth. Jesus dignified our commitment to the common tasks and labor.

By the way, in New Testament times priests and pastors had to learn a trade. There were not salaried religious leaders; no hourly ones either. They had to support themselves and their families, and then they served the Lord as volunteers. St. Paul was a tent maker: dignified, honest labor. Peter, Andrew, James and John were fishermen. Paul later agreed to receive help so that he could devote full time to the Gospel, but he always kept his trade. The disciples became full time followers, for three years anyway, but they still earned their keep.

I probably should not have told you Church members that. Budget negotiations, including next year's salaries, are coming up soon. Since our clergy and staff do not have a good trade to fall back on, we would be done for if Sharon Church reverted to the New Testament policy. If I could not be a Minister, I think I would open up a bakery or a hardware store. I love old hardware stores. In fact one of our children reassured me years ago when I was having trouble keeping all the sheep in the pen, that if it didn't work, "Don't worry Daddy, we can always open up a candy store." I do not know. My grandson recently said he would prefer an Ice cream shop. The whole point is that honest labor is honored and dignified in the Bible.

"Saturday's Child works hard for his living." However menial it happens to be, never look down on the person who works. They may not be doing the job the way you could, or think they should, but we are so critical. I find myself guilty now and then, and I feel embarrassed when I realize it.

Then, of course, on this Labor Day weekend please do not forget the unemployed - those who want to work and cannot find a job. Oh, I pray for them and their families. It is devastating and scary to lose your job and not be able to find a new one. Last Friday morning the Department of Labor released the August 2009 unemployment statistics. While

it has been dropping in recent months, still 216,000 American workers lost their jobs last month alone. The over-all unemployment rate is 9.7%, expected to rise to 10% by the end of this year. In Mecklenburg County it is more than that and in some nearby counties it is as high as 14%. During this present recession, which started, for want of a better date, choose December 2007, 14.9 million Americans have been unemployed.

I pray also for those who are unhappy in their work, who need a transformation of soul and psyche. Or, in their present situation, need to learn how to tolerate the boss or fellow employees or working conditions. They might need a new job, but it could be they need a long walk down a street called, "Change-of-Attitude Lane." And pray for those who would like to change jobs to a new location to be near family and friends, but cannot find a place to work.

I chose our Sermon text from the ninth chapter of John, one of my favorite hitching posts in the Bible. It mainly is a fascinating story of a man who was born blind but received his sight when he met Jesus. It begins with a thorny little question of why he had been born blind. Did his parents sin or did he? Jesus said, "Nobody sinned to cause this malady. This man was born blind so that the works of God might be manifest in and through him. And Jesus gave him his sight.

Then he goes on. Verse four is the little verse I selected for today's sermon: Jesus said, "We must work the works of Him who sent me while it is day; for the night comes, when no one can work." Pause there for a moment. It sounds so ominous and final! His Cross and death were just a couple of months away. And, as it turned out their sacrifices were not all that much further away, as time goes. Jesus previously warned that "You never know the day or the hour; it will come as a thief in the night."

The days which change our lives come as a surprise. They start out the same as every other day. I often hear people say, "But I just talked to him last Wednesday, and now he's gone." Or, "I never dreamed this could happen," people tell me incessantly, "If I had only known. If I had any idea that this would be the last time I saw him, I would have done this or that differently. I wish someone had told me."

Well, have no doubt about it, (Are you listening?) Jesus Christ is telling you now: life has its limits. There is a time to be born and a time to die. We are each and all here for a purpose, chosen and assigned by God, and it is clearly defined by him: "We are here to do the works of him who sent me." That is, to do God's work. And we had better be about it.

It is flattering that Jesus said "we, we must do the work of him who sent me." He could have said, "I", I must do the works of him who sent me. Earlier he declared that HE was the light of the world. Back in the Sermon on the Mount," (Matthew 5) he did say that "We, meaning you and I, were the Light of the World, like it all might turn to darkness unless we shine forth the reflective light of the God Incarnate. WE must do the work, i.e., together with Christ, we have our work to do.

Each of us has a time and a place and some chores to accomplish. We are given an indeterminate number of days to get it all accomplished, so we should work while it is day, for the night comes when you can work no more. Jesus is just reminding us not to delay the order of the day! For the night cometh when no one can work.

Near the end of the Book of Acts (Chapter 24) St. Paul had been presenting his defense of the Gospel for which he lived and died. He had an awful time. Finally, he was brought before the Governor, Felix by name. After Paul had spoken about his faith in Jesus Christ, his case was so dynamic and convincing that the Governor took a personal interest. It says he conversed with Paul often. But finally, to give himself more time think and to evaluate what he should do next, he spoke these famous words, "Go away for now Paul, but when I have a convenient season, I will summon you again."

Well, it turns out that he had some ulterior motive, but if you read on down to verse 27 it says, I quote, "Two years later, Felix was replaced by Festus, and he departed, leaving Paul in prison." The convenient season never came. He kept putting it off. He delayed it time and again, until one day it was too late. I have often pondered whether Felix ever returned in his memory to the day when he was talking to Paul. He came so close; he was within an inch or two of the goal he wanted and needed, and he let it slip away. Carelessness is still the number one sin of the faithless. He knew there was something worthy in it, and he missed it. I have often wondered if he would have jumped at the chance to go back and live

it all over again. We will never know.

What we do know is that our time is now: to do the works of him who gave us life and love and the liberty to choose how we will do it. God always says now is the time; now is the hour, now is your moment. Oh please don't miss it; or you will have missed everything you want or need.

As we close, I pray for you and me and all God's children everywhere, that as this summer season wiggles to its close, that we will find the time and devotion to do the work of him who sent us here to be beacons to the lost, to declare good news to the discouraged, to bring The Living Water of Jesus Christ to those who live in the deserts of human life. For now and evermore. Amen.