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Talent Show?

During these weeks before advent we hear warnings to stay alert and be prepared for the coming of the Lord and in First Thessalonians to "not fall asleep." So I want to start by asking "what keeps you up at night?" If your answer is something related to money-- you are not alone.

Americans spend on average about four hours every day thinking about money. A survey revealed that money is on people's minds, especially for younger generations like Gen Z and Millennials, with topics like inflation and making ends meet at the top of their concerns. A third of people say that worries about finances were affecting their sleep.

What else captures our attention? What do you spend your days and nights thinking about? What leaves you spent even when you don't move a muscle.

We worry about what other people think about us or whether or not we are spending our time wisely. Or have done enough to please our boss, our friends, our parents, our academic advisor, that one teacher, our own inner critic, or even God. It can become easy to believe that our value comes from our own individual ability to perform, produce, succeed, save money or expand our investment accounts. Or will ourselves over some finish line, turn a profit, or grow in ways that the world rewards. Financial or otherwise. We are taught that life is what we can squeeze out of it or put a price on. But, what happens when our abilities are diminished because of age or something else? Or we've tried to do everything to succeed but come up short and there is no more growth. We get lulled into believing that someone somewhere is keeping score of our life-- and we aren't sure where we stand. This leads to fear of failure and rejection. How do we spend our time and what seems to leave us spent? What messages does the world bombard us with that keep us awake and tossing and turning, spiraling inward? What is the sum of our waking and sleeping?

Speaking of how we spend our lives or what spends us---Enter: the parable of the Talents. The second of three parables of judgement in Matthew. Let me start here: The man at the center of this parable is not the Christ figure or a stand-in for God. He seems almost cartoonish. He gives slaves who have never owned anything but have been owned by a corrupt system, 20 years' worth of wages or more in one foul swoop, supposedly based on their ability (to do what?) and says "good luck!" The first two slaves are rewarded for their short term investment savvy, and the third, who buried his talent? Well- what he was afraid of happened. The third slave said "I

knew you were a harsh man." He responds- you are exactly right, you wicked and lazy slave-- be gone. Then he's thrown into outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.

This parable is a parody that proclaims life is always more than what can be measured. Exposing the limits of every system that tells you that all that matters in life is what you can get out of it, or what you can exchange for profit, or put a price on-- or even that hustle will always be rewarded with growth--- because what happens when it all crashes? When we invest our time and resources in something and it still dies? Are we living for the approval of a man who is just cartoonishly violent and mean that goes by a thousand names? What if Jesus is foreshadowing his own death? Jesus is the talent of priceless worth buried in the earth for three days, only to be raised again by a God who brings life to those cast aside and buried by the ways of this world.

Joined to Jesus and clothed with his own life-- you are always more than what any person or system says that you are. More than your successes and failure, You are more than any scorecard or book-keeper or standardized test or account balance might show. Your worth and value comes from God and cannot be measured or sold or taken away. Even when you grow in years and society begins to look down on you or say you are not as talented, because you don't work anymore, or don't have as much strength or balance or drive as you used to or you are young without many "accomplishments" or "degrees" the world acknowledges you are just as beloved to God and just as needed in the body of Christ as the day that you were baptized. You are a treasure in God's economy and of priceless worth.

When you are buried by words of a cruel master that leaves you terrified, second guessing your every move-- hear the crucified one speak your name and call you beloved.

When you are buried by demands that come from within and without- hear the crucified one say-- his death is the death of all book-keeping and score-keeping and living by ledgers. You belong just as you are.

When we are buried by what used to be or what is supposed to, or what you thought life would be- hear the Triune God say "Behold I am doing a new thing."

When you are buried by fear of rejection or failure, buried by words that leave you unable to share your gifts--- walk with Christ out of that grave too and stumble forward into God's new future. Share what you have to offer regardless of what any cruel master might think. We need you. Remember- perfect love casts out all fear. What cruel masters that have been living rent free in your body, mind, and heart need to be cast out by the power of love embodied in the Triune God for you.

When you feel overwhelmed and burdened, like you are already buried underneath the weight of the world- remember Jesus always identifies with those the world has buried and cast out. And when you find yourself in outer darkness, you'll find Jesus there too. Just as Jesus' story didn't end there yours won't either. In Christ our merciful master, the power of sin and death has been spent. Run its course and met its match. All those systems that just size people up have been shown for the bankrupt ways they are on the other side of the empty tomb. You are bound to him. His future is your own.

On the day of your baptism, before you did anything you entered the joy of your master. Accepted and welcomed into God's reign by grace alone and placed into that economy fueled by forgiveness we are free to spend our time and talents on things that money cannot buy. Those are the things that endure. As Mumford and Sons sing, "where you invest your love you invest your life." The reward for this is an ever expanding community of care- awake to one another. A portfolio not filled with numbers but names of the communion of saints and relationships that stretch into eternity. We get to treasure each other as image bearers of God and not cogs in a machine. We treat each person's life as if it was our own. A noble band of encouragers who build one another up in a world that seeks to only bury us in a thousand ways.

In this economy, that's a talent show the world is longing to be a part of.