

A couple weeks ago there took place an institution of American pop culture known as the Oscars. A night when Hollywood gathers together to celebrate themselves in all their magnificent glory. And pat themselves on the back for their tremendously important work of being famous.

Now, that may sound a little overly bitter. But when it comes right down to it, these are just movies. These are just performances. Very few of these actors and actresses and writers and directors have done anything meaningful or productive with their lives, other than entertain us for a couple hours.

It's interesting that the ancient Greeks had a much firmer grasp on this reality than we do. And it demonstrates itself in their very language. You see, the Greek word for actor is "hypocritai." A word that also means, in both Greek and English, hypocrite.

To the ancient Greeks, an actor was the very definition of a hypocrite. Someone whose life consisted of being one person on the outside and another person on the inside. That's what it means to act.

And as it turns out, Jesus picks up on this fact in our Gospel lesson today. He says, "when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocritai do." "When you pray, you must not be like the hypocritai." "When you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocritai." Do not be a hypocrite. Do not be an actor. Do not be one person on the outside and another person on the inside.

Jesus may be speaking in general terms, but there's almost certainly one particular group of people he has in mind: the Jewish religious authorities. The Pharisees. The chief priests. The scribes. The teachers of the Law.

The people known for practicing their good works in the synagogues and the street corners. The people known for teaching everyone who listened to them to do the same. It is to these people that Jesus declares, "You're nothing but a bunch of self-absorbed actors."

Your entire life is a performance. You give to the needy. But you don't do it because you care about them. You pray. But you don't pray in order to have a relationship with your heavenly Father. You fast. But you don't fast in order to develop spiritual discipline and humility. You do it all to put on a show. You're actors. You're hypocrites.

And the really scary thing is that we're not much different. Oh, maybe not in our words and actions, but certainly in our thoughts. Martin Luther once said, "Good works do not have a name." What he meant was that the moment you think about a good work long enough to put a name on it, it ceases to become good and becomes evil and selfish and prideful instead.

The moment you say, "I'm going to give these clothes to the needy, because that's a good thing to do," it ceases to become good. Oh, sure, it's still good for your neighbor. It's still good for those who need the clothes. I'm not denying that.

But it's not good in God's eyes. In God's eyes, it's you doing something to look good. In your neighbor's eyes. In your own eyes. In God's eyes. In short, it's acting. It's hypocrisy.

In fact, the truth of the matter is that all good works are hypocrisy. Because they all consist of being one person on the outside and another person on the inside. You can be a very good person on the outside. But that doesn't change the sinner that you are on the inside. You can be a white washed tomb on the outside. But that doesn't change the fact that you're still full of death on the inside.

And we really don't like to hear about that. We don't like to think about God looking at us like that. Seeing through this facade of goodness to the men and women that we are underneath it all. It makes us feel uncomfortable. It makes us feel naked.

In fact, it was that very feeling that literally caused Adam and Eve to recognize their nakedness. They were still physically perfect and without defect on the outside. But the moment they sin, they feel shame and guilt on the inside. And when God shows up, they cover themselves in a futile attempt to hide their hypocrisy.

The truth is, dust we are and to dust we will return. This mortal life we live is all an act. A show we put on to convince ourselves that we're not just lumps of dirt waiting to go back into the ground. We try to give our lives meaning through family and careers and relationships and all manner of good works. But in the end, we're just sinners waiting for the curse of death to come for us. And nothing we can do will change that.

No, the only way that we'll ever be more than dust waiting to return to the ground is if we don't return to the ground. If we're the people that God created us to be. In the beginning, God took that lump of dirt, breathed life into it, and it became a man. It became something new. Something alive. Something that had value because God had made it.

In our sinfulness, we destroy that value. But in Christ's death and resurrection, God returns it to us. He makes us more than a facade. More than an actor. More than a hypocrite. More than dust. Because we have a future that is more than dirt in the ground. We have a future where we live forever as His children.

That woman who came to Jesus in the home of Simon the leper understood that value. We don't know her name. We don't know her background. We don't know if she lived a life of good works and prayer and fasting. Or if she lived a life of sin and unrighteousness.

And that's a good thing. Because all that really matters is the love and faith she put in her Lord. While the eyes of the people around her were only focused on her and on each other – on whispering indignantly to one another and joining together in a public scolding – her eyes were on Jesus and Jesus alone. Her eyes were on the body of her Lord that would soon be crucified for her sake and taken from her sight. Her eyes were focused on doing something beautiful for him.

That jar of perfume was probably the one treasure that she had, and she put it where her heart was: with Jesus. With his death. With his burial. With his resurrection. The poor will always be among us. And we should do good for them. But she knew she would not always have Jesus sitting right in front of her and she was determined to do what she could.

She did something beautiful for her Lord because he was about to do something beautiful for her. She gave up something costly because he was going to give up his very life. She anointed her Lord's head with oil because by the waters of Holy Baptism he was going to anoint her head with his death and resurrection and take away all her sin.

Tonight we mark our heads with ashes – with the dust of the earth. But we do it in the shape of the cross so that we might know that our Lord has done something beautiful for us. He gave up his life for us. For our sin. For our hypocrisy.

And he anointed us in Holy Baptism. So that we are more than dust and ashes. We are his redeemed children. And so that we might see him rightly. See him as that woman saw him. As our Savior, who is worth more than any treasure in all the world. Amen.