Today Jesus makes this warning: “Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.” He then goes on to give an example of what practicing your piety before others looks like, using the illustration of a man sounding a trumpet before giving alms. I did a little research to see if trumpet sounding was a common practice before almsgiving and came up empty handed but the commentator did say that this was a warning about looking one way on the outside but being different on the inside. And I don’t disagree with this but worry such an interpretation can make it seem like this is a story against hypocrisy. But it does not seem to be about hypocrisy because the guy blowing the trumpet does really give the money. The warning seems more about us wanting to make sure that everyone knows about our good and virtuous behavior. To use a sports term the warning seems less about hypocrisy and more about show-boating. That is the deliberate drawing attention to ourselves in the attempt to be praised by others. And in our day and age if we actually followed this advice it might lead to the collapse of social media, but besides that we might also want to take a moment and ask why does Jesus tell us this and furthermore why do we read it on a day when we get ashes smudged on our heads?

Well, here is my take on it. Ash Wednesday is the kick off to Lent, which is a season of fasting and introspection. In this time, we are supposed to take a look at ourselves, by which we mean all of ourselves, not just the stuff that you can put on a spread sheet. What I mean by this is our Christian faith cannot be declared exclusively by outward actions. We can’t say I gave 10% of my income last year, attended Church 87% of the time (not that this happened) and volunteered seven times at the homeless shelter. Now these are all good things and things we should do, but Lent also asks us to look inside ourselves and ask why we are doing these things. The man Jesus describes today gives money, but it appears that he gives this money in order to be congratulated by his fellow citizens. He wants people to nod approvingly when he walks by, but Jesus says such an understanding is missing the point. The reason for doing good things is not to gain the approval of society and the reason that it is not is because such approval is fleeting and may not even be moral. Many an act of injustice has been done to the approving cheers of the crowd, including the crucifixion of Jesus. The goal then is to do what God wants but to also do it because we have grown so much in holiness that we want nothing more than to do what God wants. In the same way I don’t really need to convince my dog that she would like a lamb bone, our will is to be indistinguishable from God’s will.

One of the big themes in the Reformation was the debate about faith and works. Put in the cartoon version the Roman Catholics said works mattered and the Lutherans said faith mattered. But the thing is they should be indistinguishable. A fully formed faith will do works and works will be done by a fully formed faith. Just as someone can go to Church and not be Christian someone can do good works and not be Christian. They both must be present. Going into Lent Christ is asking for us to examine everything, not just our actions but our motivations as well so that we may be His own this day and forevermore.