Today’s sermon might be a little esoteric so you can fast forward if you want, but I will try and put in some jokes about Norwegians to liven things up. What I want to do today is take a moment to reflect on things that have an apparent purpose and things that don’t have an apparent purpose. Here is an example of what I mean. Think about music and the difference between a protest song and a Bach concerto. When you sit down and listen to a protest song there is a pretty straight line to what it wants. The music is often in a minor key to let you know that it is serious about whatever it is telling you and the lyrics tell to do things like never crossing a picket line or believing that Margaret Thatcher is a really bad person who will pay for her evil deeds in the next life (for some reason there is a lot of Old Testament wrath in protest songs). And I would argue that whether you agree with their point or not these songs have a very easy to discern purpose because by the time you have finished the song you know exactly what the musician’s wants you to do or how they want you to vote. Contrast this with Bach. What exactly is his intention with Concerto for Two Violins in D minor? Yes, it is lovely to listen to, but what exactly am I supposed to do? When I am done listening I am not left with instructions to hammer out love between my sister and my brother and Michael doesn’t know in which direction to row his boat. If we were asked what is so great about Bach, we could maybe say a few things about how sublime his music sounds, or how it makes us feel. And we might even be able to point out some of the mathematical precision within his composition but still it hard to say how it makes ours or anyone else’s life better. As far as I know, a Bach concerto has never looked after the widows and orphans nor has it eliminated poverty. And all this raises the question of whether music or anything for that matter is bad if it does not have direct connection to the material world? I would assume that most of us would say that there are plenty of things we appreciate that at first glance appear to have no purpose. And so I doubt any of us would advocate for their elimination because on some indescribable level we know there is something worthwhile about them even if they do not draw a straight line to something desirable or altruistic. So I begin with all of this to begin to make the point that in some ways our faith can be like music. Sometimes it is a protest song telling us to do something, but other times it is less tangible in terms of what it is actually doing.

So, for example in the passage we have from 1 Corinthians today we have something pretty direct. St. Paul says, “The body is meant not for fornication but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body.” He goes on in a little more detail but the bottom line is basically to stay away from brothels. There are some other subtleties in the text but overall, it is pretty directive. It is saying that if you are a Christian you do not engage in certain types of behavior. To contrast this direct approach lets go to the bit from the Gospel where we have this, “Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, ‘Follow me.’ Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael and said to him, ‘We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.’” There is a directive given of “follow me” but it does not really explain why or what. There is no “follow me and we will make the world a better place.” It is simply “follow”, and the only reason given for this following is the belief that they have found the Messiah. There is no transaction, rather like a Bach Concerto there is simply something not quite describable about the nature of Jesus that is attractive. So, is one better than the other? Is it better to be a Christian because it tells us to do things to make ourselves and the world better or is it better to be a Christian for more metaphysical and esoteric reasons? I will give the Anglican answer and say it is both. That is there are rules and instructions whose reasons we can clearly understand – feeding the poor, not being drunk and so on. But then there are things that sort of escape an obvious justification. Things like Jesus telling us to follow him and worshiping the Lord in the beauty of holiness. Certainly, the church should “do things” in this world to make it a better place but it must never neglect the things that do not have an obvious or direct impact on the world like worship and adoration. In the same way we don’t want to get rid of Bach and listen to only a steady diet of Pete Seeger. And it is this second piece that I want to spend a little more time looking at.

Friedrich Hayek in his book The Fatal Conceit said this, “To understand our civilization, one must appreciate that the extended order resulted not from human design or intention but spontaneously: it arose from unintentionally conforming to certain traditional and largely moral practices, many of which men tend to dislike, whose significance they usually fail to understand, [and] whose validity they cannot prove.” What he is pointing out with this quote is the limited capacity of humanity. We tend to think if we can’t explain why we need to do something that it should not be done. Hayek is pointing out that this may tell us more about our own limitations than it does about the necessity of a certain act. In other words, just because we cannot quite articulate why we should worship God or listen to beautiful music it does not mean that they are not worthy things to do. It may simply mean that they arise from places that are beyond our ability to comprehend. Think of it like this. Let’s say you could travel back to caveman days and let’s further suppose that you were fluent in the caveman-ese. When we emerge from our WABAC machine we find that we have arrived in the caveman suburbs on a Saturday and the cavemen and cavewomen are having a backyard barbecue and preparing some mastodon chops. We then decide to ask them why they are eating. In other words, we want them to articulate why it is that they are involved in this act of eating. They would probably simply tell you they were eating because they were hungry. In other words, their eating would be tied to nothing more than a desire found inside them of whose origins they did not understand. They could not articulate to us modern understandings of nutrition or what human bodies need to function best and yet they would be doing pretty much the same thing that modern man would do if offered some mastodon kebobs. In the same way, we cannot always justify everything that God asks of us or our desire to worship him but like our cavemen we are filled with a desire to do it even though we are not totally sure why.

I think my point in all of this is to not neglect the aspects of our faith that don’t appear to have real world implications. If we are humble and honest, we must admit that there are parts of us we don’t quite understand and those parts of us are fed in ways that may not quite make sense. I can’t perfectly describe what happens in the Eucharist, sure there are theological understandings, but on some level, I simply know that I need it like a caveman knows they need some mastodon meat. The beauty and ritual that are on display in worship services speak to us in ways that words and logic cannot articulate drawing us closer to God and his kingdom this day and forevermore.