Today’s sermon is going to be a bit experimental. Not in a freeform jazz or French New Wave Cinema sense but more in the sense of pondering some questions for which there may not be perfect answers. Please don’t worry I did not have a spiritual crisis while in Texas rather I was intrigued by something we have in our lesson from Thessalonians today and what it got me thinking is a little amorphous. In practical terms, what this means is today’s sermon might be a little less preachy and a little more contemplative, with less answers and more of what St. Paul calls, “through a glass darkly” kind of stuff. So, with all that out of the way lets get to the verse that got all this contemplation started. It reads, “For our appeal does not spring from deceit or impure motives or trickery, but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the message of the gospel, even so we speak, not to please mortals, but to please God who tests our hearts.”

I probably should have included the previous verse to give a little context but since I didn’t, here is what is going on. Paul is talking about when he first came as a missionary to those in Thessalonica. When he talks about the “appeal” he is talking about the Gospel message that he and his companions preached among them. And, in explaining how they preached that message, he says that it was a valid presentation, because it did not spring from three distinct criteria. First it was not deceitful. Second, it was not done from impure motives, and, third it was not meant to trick those who were hearing it. And this all sounds rather nice and like something we should probably do, but what exactly does this look like? How can we meet those criteria? How are we not tricky and deceitful? And this is where the promised amorphism comes in. For it is easy to argue against the extremes. As the church, we should not act like a cult, luring people in with whatever works, doing the traditional bait and switch. For as we know, most people who join cults did not sign up for the weird stuff but were lured through nice and wonderful sounding things. Charles Manson appealed to the need for family and love before switching over to going out and killing people. But what about when this happens on a lessor scale? What about a church that puts in a coffee bar? Is that some sort of trickery to lure people in? What about youth groups who make use of whatever it is the young kids are into today, like a mechanical bull? Is that trickery and deceit? The interesting thing is in Paul’s list pure motives are only one of the three criteria. In other words, we can be well intentioned but if we use trickery and deceit, we have failed based on what he tells us. Of course, we should want people to become Christian but how exactly are we to go about that task? Do we hand them a copy of Richard Hooker’s English Reformation classic *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* and then hope for the best? I have two copies in my office if you would like to peruse it. I am not sure if that is the best option but at the same time, I am not sure that it is the worst. We live in a time where there are countless books, committees, study groups, conferences and whatnot that are trying to figure out how to shape our message for today’s society and, yet, despite all this, the church continues to shrink. Maybe we are actually using deceit and trickery and that is why God is not blessing it.

I remember years ago before I went off to seminary and was ordained, I was in a Sunday School class and the topic of evangelism came up. The discussion settled in on how we could convince others to become Christian. There were various theories offered for what we could say – it can make your life better, it brings you into a wonderful community, it makes you a better person and so on. And all of the things mentioned were not bad or necessarily wrong but at some point, I got a little frustrated and said, “how about because it’s true.” That is how about the reason for why we should be Christian is because it is what it claims to be. When Nils Bohr was working on quantum physics, he didn’t argue that it should be believed because one day it would help us in the creation integrated circuits. Instead, he argued for its fundamental truth. Everything else was a side effect of that. As Jesus says in Matthew’s Gospel, “But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness.” That is where it starts. It appears that we are caught in a paradigm where we focus on the implications rather than the thing itself. And because of this, it seems to me that we are more prone to deceit and trickery. Here is what I mean by that. When we lose our focus on the basics, we turn Christianity into a product whose worth is evaluated based on what exactly it can do for you. And as a result, it becomes a competition not against truth but against other items that promise to make your life better. My frustration in that Sunday School class was not with the idea that Christianity could make you a better person or give you community or anything else, but rather my frustration was with people saying that those things were foundational to the faith. That those things were the items on which all other items were built. And when that happens a problem is created. For when we promise a wonderful community what happens if someone finds a better community at the Loyal Order of Water Buffaloes like Fred Flintstone did? Would that somehow make Christianity untrue? Or what if someone found that Prozac made them happier than church? Would Jesus no longer have died on the cross for our sins? It seems that when we move our focus away from the fundamental truth of Christianity we get into marketing and marketing is always subject to spin and spin is subject to deceit and trickery

I just wonder in all of this if we would simply go back to being the church where it would all lead. What I mean by being the church is that what if we went back to focusing on the central message rather than byproducts of the central message, because when we focus on the biproducts we end up being just one more voice in a sea of voices competing for the same thing. I mean we have a really good message but to me its strength lies in its truth. I sort of joked earlier that maybe we should hand out copies of Richard Hooker’s *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*. For those of you not familiar with the book it is one of the earliest statements about why the Church of England exists and what it believes. It would be very out of place in much of modern Christianity because it does not focus on what Christianity can do for you but is more concerned with what the church is to be about; how we worship, how we know and follow God. When I started, I said this sermon was going to be more questioning in nature and so this is really the question I want to start to answer. What does a church that does not resort to trickery, deceit or impure motives look like? And my answer is I am not positive but I think a great deal of it has to do with focusing on the right things. I think in many ways the Church has lost its way and is following the lead of the rest of society rather than standing above it all. The Church needs to be different and a key part of being different is remembering why we are all here in the first place. We are here because through Jesus’ death and resurrection we have been put right with God so that we may be his own this day and forevermore.