If heaven is a place where all that you have wished for in this life is fulfilled, if heaven is where all of our dearest dreams come true, and I certainly believe that it is, then sometime, somewhere I expect to have the lead in the heavenly musical of “Fiddler on the Roof.” Ever since I first saw that musical I have related to the milkman Tevye. His relationship to God, his anguish over his children, his love for his wife, the joy he takes in his friends and the little things of life, and his lament over the injustice that he observes all have echoes in my soul. And certainly his love of Tradition! Tradition is one of the first songs of the musical and in it Tevye muses about why the Jews of Anatevka always pray with their heads covered, or why the men wear aprons with tassels. “I don't know,” he says, “it's tradition!”

Do we do things that way? Do we do things without knowing why, just because it's tradition? In our house on Christmas morning we can open our stocking before breakfast, but the presents under the tree always have to wait and then we open them one at a time, not all at once. Do you know why? We also make all the traditional foods for Thanksgiving, but we also make peas with pearl onions in a white sauce, even though none of the kids will eat it. Why? And of course on St. Patrick's day we always have boiled cabbage and corned beef. Do you know why? Me either—it's tradition!

Do we do things here at the church that way? Do we do things without thinking about why we them, just because it's tradition? Why do we gather for worship at 9:45, why not 10:00, or 9:00. Tradition. Why do we stand for the Affirmation of Faith and the Gloria? Couldn't we just as easily do those sitting down? Tradition! Why do we say the Lord's Prayer with thees and thous and thys when nothing else we do in worship uses those old words? Tradition! Did you ever wonder why you come to church at all? Maybe it's tradition. Your parents brought you, they went their whole lives, so did their parents and their parents before them. Maybe it's family tradition. Is that the only reason?

Jesus was one for breaking traditions. This passage from Mark is about the tradition of ritual hand
washing before eating. Now I would think that it's a pretty good idea to wash your hands before you
eat, given germs and bacteria and the spread of disease. But they knew nothing about that in the first
century, the Pharisees are objecting not on the grounds of cleanliness, but because the disciples are
breaking tradition. They're eating with defiled hands. Of course Jesus quickly points out that they are
hypocrites, that it's not what goes into a person that God is so concerned about, but what comes out.
He tells them that they are concerned about the wrong things, that tradition is not reason enough to do
something. Jesus gives us the instruction to make the distinction between the commands of God and
human ideas. Do not invoke the authority of God to justify human practices and preferences. Do not
hold on to empty traditions, claiming they are holy things. It does not say in the Bible that you can't
open your Christmas stockings on Christmas Eve. Worshiping at 9:45 did not come down with Moses
as the 11th commandment.

Sometimes it is this insistence on human tradition as divine mandate that opens the church up to
charges of hypocrisy. Do you ever get that? Someone might say that they don't want to be part of a
church because it is full of hypocrites. What is a hypocrite anyway? The word comes from an old
Greek word that means an actor, someone on stage, someone who delivers lines that have nothing to do
with their real life. It means someone who talks one way but doesn't live it out. They don't practice
what they preach. They don't walk their talk. Is that us? Is that a fair description of religious people?
Is that a fair description of Christians? Maybe it's a word for people who do something simply because
it is tradition and it has no real meaning in their lives.

The Presbyterian preacher and poet, J. Barrie Shepherd tells a story of a very self-centered individual
who became concerned about other's people's negative image of him. Finally he spoke to his pastor,
who proposed that he try, for one month, simply pretending to be a different person, one who cared
deeply about the welfare of others. He was to live, in effect, as a hypocrite, pretending to be something
he was not, to be a far better person than he actually was. By the end of those four weeks he
generosity, concern, and selflessness had become so captivating that he was no longer pretending.
Was he a hypocrite? Of course he was. But maybe if we really think about it, hypocrisy is not such a terrible thing. Because isn't that all of us? We all fall short of what we try to be. But we keep trying.

The late William Sloane Coffin was heard to say on more than one occasion that those who would not join a church full of hypocrites should take heart because there was always room for one more.

Our traditions are hypocritical only in the sense that we don't fully live up to them. The Pharisees were upset about the washing of hands. As a symbol of the washing of our souls, cleansing ourselves before we give thanks to God for all he has done, it's not a bad tradition. But if the symbol becomes empty and we do it without thinking or the tradition becomes an end itself then we can be let to the hypocrisy of the empty gesture. But many times the tradition is leading us where God would have us go. We say the Lord's prayer each week and ask “forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.” Do we just say that and are hypocritical? Have we forgiven everyone? If we haven't, are we hypocrites or are we still imperfect? We stand for the affirmation of Faith and say “I believe . . .” but do we really? Do we believe all the time? Don't we have our doubts and questions? So are we hypocrites? Maybe. Lord, I believe, help my unbelief. Our traditions help teach us what to live up to. They show us where we are going by the grace and mercy of God.