

**“THE HAT WE WEAR,” A Sermon delivered by the Reverend Dr. Geoffrey G. Drutchas,
St. Paul United Church of Christ, October 7, 2018**

Congregation, I have never been one to wear caps or hats per se. But as I have gone through life and ministry I have acquired many hats in a proverbial sense. Ministry here at St. Paul Church is highly varied. Over the course of the day I have many different jobs and roles, and put on, so-to-speak—a different hat for each. I am preacher, teacher, counselor, liturgist, retreat leader, church historian, archivist, editor, graphic artist, and light turner-offer. And I also answer phones! It’s all good—at least to me.

Of course, not everyone feels that way. Some years back our congregation had an associate pastor, Anna Souto. She was a fine minister. She continued with us for five years. However, Reverend Anna found all the hat-changing that goes with parish ministry a little overwhelming and stressful. Consequently, she decided to make a change to hospital chaplaincy where things can be different every day but in kind of the same way, if you know what I mean. Reverend Souto took on a very good, very valuable ministry in the hospital rooms of the Detroit Medical Center downtown. Some of us used to meet her down there either when checking in for medical care or visiting patients who were. I am glad that she found what she liked better or best—without all the hat-changing involved in parish life here.

Unfortunately, for those stressed out by hat-changing, it isn’t always possible to find comparable relief. In life, there is some hat-changing, quite apart from the specific careers that any of us choose to do, that we can’t really set aside. It just goes with the territory of being human with certain natural aspirations that go with living in the times that we do.

For example, we never stop being a mother—or a father—do we? That’s a hat that many of us always keep in hand. And if we’re married, we have a hat in hand or on our head as a husband or wife—hopefully, until death do us part. Not to be forgotten either is the hat of friend and good neighbor. But our hat collection doesn’t stop there. What about being a citizen? And, also, what about being a hat-wearing Christian?

Maybe it’s the season that coming up—elections *are* just around the corner. Or maybe it’s just today as we celebrate world-wide communion and think more about brothers and sisters around the globe. But I find myself personally checking out, very particularly, three hats from my wardrobe of life-roles, quite different from each other. One of them

has a big “I” on it. That stands for concerned Investor. A second hat has a big “A” on it--for proud American. The third has a large “C” for Christian, as in Christian disciple or follower of Christ.

Congregation, right through the week I mentally--sometimes consciously, sometimes not--keep on trying out these different hats for their respective size and fit and style. Which should I choose? What should I wear? Which suits me best? And why?

The “I” hat fits really well—don’t you think? Goodness knows, like everyone else, I want a strong economy. Some day I’m going to retire and I’m going to count on pension fund investments. Long live Wall Street *and* Main Street! May they forever thrive. Our entire community and congregation also benefit as our nation prospers. We can do things in ministry together here that we might not otherwise be able to do. Fewer people also end up homeless or without food for the table, which is a very good thing. At the same time, should the fiscal bottom line be the bottom line for our lives? Is money really everything--the be-all, end-all for what should concern or preoccupy us as men and women? What happens to us when life becomes all about money? Isn’t that selfish? And doesn’t that diminish who we are and meant to be?

Of course, I have another hat here. How does it fit? I like the bold “A.” After all, I am an American through and through, born and bred. I was raised by my family to believe in the importance of defending this nation. As a kid in school I “pledged my allegiance to the flag of the United States of America and to the republic for which it stands, one nation indivisible...” Those words still stir me as I recite them. Its wasn’t an accident that I ended up in the U.S. Navy years ago. I continue to take my citizenship very seriously. Personally, I don’t think there’s a better nation on earth. Do you? I want to see our country stay strong and vital. We have to spend accordingly, even if it does mean something out of pockets, as well as other unselfish sacrifices.

Yet one of the greatest things about our great nation is that it has never preached that might makes right. Instead, it has been democratically committed to the higher values of liberty and justice for all, which has ramifications even beyond our own borders and how we relate to the rest of the world. At the end of the Second World War when Europe and Asia lay devastated from the conflict, we could have left them all in a heap. But we instead chose to help build them up again because that was true to our values as we then understood them. We understood also the in the global community our planet was fast

becoming the well-being of our neighbor impacts our well-being; their security our security; their prosperity our prosperity.

Admittedly, we were a more “Christian nation” back then, still remembering Jesus’ caution to us that the “first shall be last and the last shall be first.” Christianity tempered our capitalism. It also tempered our nationalism and helped us keep our patriotism in context and a more nuanced perspective.

Oh yes, I have my “C” hat here. Thinking about how our nation may just need some tempering, let me try it on again. Thank goodness, it still fits. It feels good too. I feel like a better person just wearing it. It certainly jogs my memory.

One of the first things I learned in Sunday School and Vacation Bible School growing up was the Ten Commandments. And at the head of those Ten Commandments, God’s great proclamation: “You shall have no other Gods before me, because I am a jealous God.” (*Exodus 20:1-6*) As my Church School teachers made clear to me that was God’s way of emphatically telling us that we need to value and cherish his ways above all other ways; his teachings above what anyone else might preach or peddle. And what does God teach? Through Israel’s prophets and his very own son, Jesus, God calls upon us to love him and fellow men and women more than anything else.

Significantly, neither the prophets nor Jesus talked about pension investments or patriotism or national power as what matters most in life. Instead, they stressed the importance of making sure that we have a good soul and a loving, generous spirit in all things. Jesus didn’t mince words: “What does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?” (*Mark 8:36; Matthew 16:26*) And when an earnest rich young man comes to Jesus to ask how he might attain eternal life, Jesus informs him that he should start first by loving God and demonstrating love for his fellow men and women. (*Mark 10:17-31*) He then provides this young man with some invaluable bonus advice if he wants to do even better and stretch himself further in faithfulness. Namely, go sell your many beautiful possessions and share the proceeds with the poor. In this way you will show that you do love God and others more than material possessions. On hearing this that young rich man was so crestfallen. He wanted to stay a millionaire and enjoy the best of heaven too. He wanted everything on earth and in heaven without having to make sacrifices or trade-offs. But eternal life and salvation doesn’t come cheap.

As Jesus taught, we have to make choices—sometimes, if not often, between other very attractive and appealing things that can tempt and distract us, including love of money and a love of nation. As Jesus explained, a house divided cannot stand. (*Mark 3:25*) We cannot worship God and mammon equally and simultaneously—*mammon* here meaning not just money or our investments, but more largely worldly wealth and power. Everything represented by mammon is a lesser god and a lesser good. (*Matthew 6:24; Acts 8:20*) And heaven forbid if we should become children of lesser gods, forever chasing after lesser goods.

I don't exactly know why, but God in his grace has given me a taste for *this* hat. With its big "C" it just looks right and feels right for me. Oh, the other hats are good. I would never discard them. They're not at all bad to wear sometimes, along with the perspective they lend or bring. Nevertheless, this is one which still means the most to me.

Putting it on always reminds me of Jesus who is none other than "the way, the truth, and the life." (*John 14:6*) And even when I take the hat off for a bit or a while, I can't forget it, or forget the values it represents and calls us to honor in daily life. And the hat certainly does have a pronounced international or transnational flair, doesn't it? But what's the surprise? After all, in Jesus Christ there is no north, south, east, or west. In his ministry Jesus was always about removing human-imposed boundaries and limits on God's love. Remember the stories of the Syro-Phoenician woman whose daughter he healed and the many Samaritans he met and praised? (*Mark 7:26; Luke 10:25-33, 17:16; John 4:7-39*)

Even moving from hat to hat, as I am inclined to do, I shouldn't feel conflicted. After all, our nation's Pledge of Allegiance affirms that we always need to honor country "under God," i.e., serving God's purposes first and most. And even though nothing similar is inscribed on the buildings of Wall Street or the stores of Main Street we all know the common folk story or fable of King Midas who changed everything to gold and ended up with nothing that mattered, even losing the daughter he loved. It is with good reason that the Apostle Paul writes to his companion and friend Timothy: "Those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and hurtful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is the root of all evils; it is through this craving that some have wandered away from faith and pierced their hearts with many pangs." (*1 Timothy 6:9-10*) As Jesus would put it, those who have ears, hear.

(Jeremiah 5:21; Matthew 13:9) Any and all hats we wear in life are going to rest more easily and comfortably on those ears, if we do.

This coming week, congregation, we are going to be saying good-bye to Ilene Krogman, who passed away at 101. Her funeral service will be held here at church is on Wednesday. Some of you may remember her. She used to come to church in a hat—and for good reason. Her earlier livelihood came from millinery. Indeed, Ilene spent her entire career as a purchaser of elegant hats and headware for women’s stores in downtown Detroit and then for suburban shopping centers.

One time as a joke I brought a silly hat to the Applewood Nursing Home where she was living. It was all to make her laugh, which she did. Today, however, is serious. Although there’s nothing wrong in having fun and doing things a little of the box, I hope that you won’t find today’s hat show entirely silly.

Let me leave you with a question. What hat do you like to wear most and best? And does it honor Christ? **Amen.**