

True victory

by [Barbara Brown Taylor](#) in the [December 12, 2001](#) issue

Now that the war against terrorism is well under way, things have eased up a little in Clarkesville. A month ago, you could not walk into a room full of people without someone trying to pin a flag on your lapel. If you refused, or even hesitated, you were treated to such a narrowing of the eyes that you got a sense of what it must have been like to be a suspect during the McCarthy era, or an early Christian in Rome. The pressure to salute the state was so great that it felt dangerous not to.

Recent victories in Afghanistan seem to have released some of the tension. Chasing down the Taliban over there has become more compelling than chasing down reluctant patriots at home. Plus, the holidays are here. Most of the churches in town have taken the red, white and blue bunting off their facades for Thanksgiving, and by next week Christmas decorations will outnumber American flags.

My uneasiness about the symbolism of the flag does not mean that I am ungrateful for the protection it offers me. The other day at the airport I caught an armed national guardsman in fatigues watching a blond toddler trying to negotiate the escalator. As I watched him watching her, his face melted into a smile of such tenderness that I wanted to run over and kiss him on the cheek.

The problem is that I am stuck with another symbol that I hold higher than the flag. Even if I do not wear it on my lapel, it is still right here on my forehead where it was placed at my baptism so many years ago. The cross stands for some of the same things the flag does, such as liberty and justice for all. But the kind of power it uses to pursue those virtues is entirely different from the kind I am reading about in the newspaper these days.

The power of the cross wins by losing. It disarms the enemy by refusing to fight. It dismisses any victory defined as the defeat of one people by another people, holding out for the one true victory of a healed world at peace with God.

If this understanding of power is neither obvious nor particularly appealing, then scripture is at least partly to blame. Between the first page of Mark's Gospel and the last page of Revelation, we have not one but several portraits of the Messiah who

gives meaning to the cross. In some accounts, he is clearly crushed by it, while in others it seems no more than a prop. By the last book of the Bible, he has swapped the cross for a white charger and a sword. His job is to strike down the nations, ruling them with a rod of iron and treading the winepress of God's own fury.

In times of war, it seems natural to prefer this final portrait, which allows us to sing triumphant songs in church about winning battles and vanquishing foes. As long as they are sung in the presence of a cross, however, these images retain a certain irony. More often than not, the first foes any of us has to face are those inside of us that know only one way to win.

The week after the terrorist attacks, I heard a story that went something like this. A man drove by his church and saw no American flag out front. He turned his car around and went to Home Depot, where he bought the last large flag in stock. Then he went home to get some tools. Within the hour, he was drilling holes in the wooden church sign for a flag holder. Then his pastor drove up.

"What do you think you're doing?" his pastor asked him as soon as he could get his window rolled down. "What does it look like I'm doing?" the man replied, with his finger still on the trigger of his drill. "There was no flag here, of all places. I'm taking care of that."

As you may imagine, a heated discussion ensued. The pastor, who was a couple of inches taller than the man, got out of his car to argue that the church was supposed to be a sanctuary free of political statements. The man, who never put down his drill, argued that the church was obligated to pray for a nation that defended religious freedom. During the first round, neither yielded an inch to the other.

During the second round, the man revealed that two of his children were on active duty in the military. If he could not pray for them in church, he said, then he was through with the church. The pastor said that he should by all means pray for his children, but that praying for them did not require posting a flag in the churchyard. The man wanted to know why not. What was wrong with asking God to bless America? When the pastor finally asserted his property rights and removed the flag, the man turned on his heel and disappeared into the church.

He chose a pew near the altar and said the Lord's Prayer over and over again until he stopped shaking. After about the tenth round, he heard someone slide into the pew behind him. He was pretty sure he knew who it was, which was why he did not

turn around. He just sat there. They both just sat there, with nothing to look at but the altar and the brass cross hanging over it.

Finally the man heard his pastor's voice behind him, so low and broken that it was hard to hear. "What are your children's names?" he asked. "If you will tell me, then I promise you that I will pray for them every day until they come home."

It was the only fight he ever won by losing, the man said later. The pastor might have said the same thing, for in one fell swoop the cross vanquished both their foes.