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## COMMENTARY

Palaima: Value peace for the gift that it is

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On Christmas Day four years ago, Air Force veteran Willie Nelson looked at the world around him and wrote a song that asked, "Whatever Happened to Peace on Earth?"

The holiday season is the right time of year to raise this question. Jesus Christ had two radical messages. One is "Love your fellow human beings, even if they are poor and needy and can bring you no material benefit." The other is "If an enemy strikes you, turn the other cheek."

In the ancient Greek culture, interpersonal relationships were guided by the principle of *kharis*. Acting according to *kharis* means that we do good unto others because it creates obligatory good feelings that may benefit us in the future. The message of Jesus to do good selflessly, without expectation of being paid back, was unheard of.

It is hard to remember - because we used military force so readily after the events of Sept. 11, 2001 - that Christ was the prince of peace. Christ preached against using violence in response to violence done to us. In this, too, the Christian message was revolutionary.

Greek culture saw war as the normal state of human beings. They were inured to violence. War was common. Peace was the hard-won exception. We sign peace treaties believing that they restore the normal, natural state of affairs. The Greeks made peace treaties for a limited number of years. They renewed treaties yearly, accompanied by sacred rituals. They knew it was hard to keep war away.

Part of the reason, then, that we are as bewildered as Nelson about the ongoing war is that we do not value peace for the rare gift that it is. It is hard for us to see what the organized violence we use against other nations, or against insurgents in distant lands, does to our world, to ourselves and to our soldiers and their families. We even justify war on Christian principles.

Mark Twain saw the terrible irony in that, at the time of the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars. His "protest song" was a short story, "The War Prayer." (Visit [www.givewings.com/peace/warprayer2.html](http://www.givewings.com/peace/warprayer2.html).)

Twain condemns Christians who would claim that we fight with God on our side. To him, praying to God for victory was tantamount to praying as follows: "O Lord our God, help us to tear their soldiers to bloody shreds with our shells; help us to cover their smiling fields with the pale forms of the patriot dead; help us to drown the thunder of their guns with the shrieks of their wounded, writhing in pain; help us to lay waste their humble homes with a hurricane of fire; help us to wring the hearts of their offending widows with unavailing grief; help us to turn them out roofless with their little children to wander unfriended the wastes of their desolated land in rags and hunger and thirst."

It is clear that Twain was troubled by our capacity as Americans to assume that when we use state-sanctioned violence, we are bringing about good.

We can use and tolerate war as we do, because we do not feel strongly enough the words of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.: "Through violence you may murder the hater, but you do not murder hate. In fact, violence merely increases hate. Hate cannot drive out hate: Only love can do that."

Pete Seeger quotes those words in performing his classic song for peace "Bring 'Em Home." In it he reminds us, "Our foe is hunger and ignorance, / Bring 'em home, bring 'em home. / You can't beat that with bombs and guns, / Bring 'em home, bring 'em home."

Peace on earth.

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