

“Stay Salty, Stay Lit”  
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Isaiah 58:1-9a  
Matthew 5:13-20

You are the salt of the earth. What could Jesus have possibly meant when he said that? Well, we know how necessary salt is to life, and to the body. Of course salt gives flavor, and is the simplest of seasonings needed to make many foods tasty. If you taste your skin on a hot day or after any kind of strenuous exercise, you can tell that salt even plays an important role in our own body chemistry. In Jesus’ time, of course there was no refrigeration, so people relied on salt not only for flavor, but also for preserving food.

You are the light of the world. We know how necessary light is. It helps us see our way. Light gives off the energy, whether through fire, or through the sun, or through electricity, that creates heat. Light becomes food for plants as they perform photosynthesis. But I want you to consider how bold a statement that Jesus made in telling his listeners this simple statement: *You* are the light of the world. Something important to notice is that Jesus said the same thing about himself in John’s gospel: “*I am the light of the world*” (John 8:12). I believe Jesus is telling us that there is something of God’s holiness within us, if only we are willing to let it shine.

Recognizing that light isn’t always easy. In fact, we may feel like there are others always trying to blow it out. Others of us may be quick to hide that light under a bushel basket. Last fall, one of our church youth, Wanangwa Nyirongo, asked for my proofreading help as he worked on his essay for college applications. I asked his permission if I could talk about him a little in this sermon, and he agreed. In his first essay, he had written about how difficult a time he had had trying to be himself. He expressed he wasn’t even sure he knew who that was, that he was always willing to go along with his friends’ ideas, but he wasn’t exactly sure what he wanted. I asked him to tell me more about that. As an example, Wanangwa told me that when he first moved to the US as a child, after living in Belgium and his home in Malawi before that, his pediatrician told him “If you want to make friends in Leonia, you’d better go by your middle name, William. It’s just easier to say and so the other kids won’t give you trouble.” From then on, Wanangwa accepted other peoples’ ideas about how he should act and move through the world. Until one day, Wanangwa found himself on the cusp of manhood, wondering who exactly he is; who God is calling him to be, what light has God put in him?

“If salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything.” I suspect many of us have reached moments like this in our lives, questioning what it is we have to offer the world, and whether it is worth anything. But here’s the thing about Wanangwa. If you know him, you know that he has a light that is pretty impossible to hide. He has this big, beautiful smile that lights up his face, and if you’re lucky enough to see it, you cannot help but to

smile too. At our church, he is respected and beloved as a person of integrity and faith; my first year here, he was attending the adult bible study at just 14 years old, and when I asked him to help as a leader in worship, he went right up there, fearless. Since then, all the younger children of the church look up to him and I have to tell you that some of us older folks look up to him too. I don't get to see him in action in high school, but I know that in his first year, he broke a sprinting record in track. Last summer, Wanangwa came on his own, without parents, on a summer mission trip to Atlantic City, to help develop a program that will feed the hungry poor. He worked hard, sweat hard, never once complained. He contributed to the spirit of the group. He was a big brother to the other children who had come on the intergenerational trip. In many ways, he was like salt, in that his presence helped to bring out the flavors of all the other people there, each ingredient of the mission team. Another thing about salt is that it will make people thirsty for water. Being around Wanangwa made others thirsty for the living waters that Jesus promised, shown in his quiet spirituality.

So, I have to admit I was very surprised to hear from Wanangwa that he wasn't feeling salty; how could a runner that amazing not feel salty? And how could he not feel lit, when I as well as others could see light just spilling out around him?

My daughter Kai, a second grader, realized something recently. She has found out that the middle finger can be used as an insult. It happened when I was driving with her in the backseat. Some angry driver gave me The Finger, as New Jersey drivers are prone to do. I shouted at him through my closed windows, "I'm moving! You don't have to give me The Finger!"

"What's The Finger?" Kai asked me.

I told her that sometimes people show the middle finger to insult other people. And I did not think anything of it. Until later that night after we tucked her in and turned out the lights. Footsteps in the hall, as the frame of her body appeared in our bedroom doorway. "Mama, I was trying to go to sleep and I accidentally showed my middle finger to the wall. Is that bad?" "Your bedroom wall doesn't care what you do with your body. Now go to sleep."

Another day she had gone to the zoo with her friend. That night, she reported to her parents, "When we were looking at the giraffes, I accidentally showed my middle finger to the giraffes." "Did anyone else see it?"

"No."

"Did you do it with hatred in your heart?"

"No."

Then, she burst into wailing tears. "What if the giraffes thought that I hated them?" We had to assure her that giraffes don't take any offense to middle fingers.

She kept on like that, telling on herself each time she accidentally showed the middle finger. "I can't seem to help doing it!" she said.

Finally, this is what I told Kai:

“Your body is wonderfully and thoughtfully made. Each part of your body is a gift from God, even your middle finger. God did not make your body to be an insult. Using the middle finger as an insult was just some mean idea some people decided to do, to make our good bodies into weapons. But you get to use and enjoy every part of your body that God gave you. I don’t want you to let some fools who decided middle fingers are bad, to take away your ability to enjoy and use your middle finger. I know you don’t have hatred in your heart, so I don’t care how you use your middle finger; I trust you won’t use it to hurt anyone. You can stop telling on yourself.”

I am convinced that God has put within us all the salt, all the light, all the goodness, all the holiness, we will need in a lifetime. But over time, we get messages from others that tell us our light is no good. Our salt isn’t worth anything. They tell us our bodies are not of value, or try to limit how we can use them; they may even try to make us or others see our bodies as weapons-- just look at how upset people were at J-Lo’s Superbowl performance. And so, we believe them and their messages. Over time, we look for bushel baskets to hide our light. We keep our salt shakers behind cupboard doors. We suspect we are of no worth, or that the light we have to show is bad or dangerous. And then we find we aren’t willing to risk anything for God. And that is where the true danger lies.

Wanangwa is on the cusp of discovery of the light God has set within him. Look out world, because this young man has so much light to give that it just might blind you. I asked him, “Wanangwa, what does your name mean?” At first he gave me a jumbled answer, saying that there are different tribes, different languages, different meanings in Malawi, the country of his birth. But then he looked me in the eye and he said, “I think my name, Wanangwa, it means freedom.”

I love Wanangwa’s name. It is a reminder to stay salty and stay lit; be free from any messages that would try to dim your light. Be free from any burdens that would try to trample your salt. Be bold in who you are, and you will find that you will make others bold around you too.

Our faith requires bold action; our faith requires moral courage, and Jesus knew it. The prophets knew it too, and Jesus said he came to fulfil the law and the prophets. Our passage from Isaiah today tells us, “Shout out, do not hold back!” We are not to hold back the salt and the light God has put within us. The prophet went on to say that the sacrifice that is most pleasing to God is not to fast-- that is, to starve ourselves, holding ourselves back to honor God. The sacrifice God wants is not to walk around in ashes, to prove our humility. No, here is the fast God chooses: “to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free...Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?” (Isaiah 58:6-7). And then, here it is: “And then, your light shall break forth like the dawn.” The light is already inside of you. It’s inside of me, too. We just have to do the things that will cause it to break forth and shine.