**Food Waste Weekend - Sample Sermon – Unitarian Universalist**

Hunger and climate change.

Our living tradition teaches us that no one should be hungry and that we are supposed to help those who are. The very first of our seven principles affirms “the inherent worth and dignity of every person.” Hunger erodes that dignity, attacks that worth.

Our tradition also teaches us that we are morally bound to care for the good earth, responsible for this remarkable gift. Our seventh tradition expresses respect for “the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.”

This weekend, these two principles come together.

We know that people in our country, and around the world, go hungry. That there are hungry families in our country, in our community, and quite possibly, even in our congregation. Around the world, over 800 million people suffer from hunger each day and 21,000 people die daily from hunger (one person every four seconds) – despite the fact that it is well documented that there is more than enough food produced – healthy food, mind you – to feed everyone in the world.[[1]](#footnote-1)[[2]](#footnote-2)

How is it that, in a world so blessed with abundant food, so many can’t count on this most basic blessing?

I call it food waste, although a better term would be wasted food. I’m not talking about rotting tomatoes or moldy bread – food that has to be thrown out because it’s not fit to eat.

I’m talking about food that you and I would be delighted to eat, but for some reason, never gets to us ... or anyone else either.

* Fruits and vegetables that are shaped in a way that grocery stores think are ugly.
* Food that goes bad because it doesn’t get refrigerated quickly enough.
* Leftovers that are perfectly good to eat but that get thrown out.
* Food from restaurants with servings that are huge, and we forget to take what’s left home.

Think about the times that you have seen the clerk at the store throwing away perfectly good food because the next shipment just arrived. Think about the farmer who grew carrots that were as not perfectly straight as the store wanted them so they were left on the ground. Think about the restaurant that serves you portions so huge that you could never finish them. Think about the gardener who grew so many tomatoes that they wanted to give some away... but no one wanted them and the food pantry said that they could not take them. Think about the food in your kitchen that looks and smells perfectly good but because yesterday’s date is on the package, you threw it away.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Think of the waste. All of it.

Globally, we waste 2.9 trillion pounds of food every year, enough to feed the world’s 800 million hungry people twice over. Here in the US, we throw away enough food every single day to fill the Rose Bowl. Every year, the average US family wastes over 1,000 pounds of food.[[4]](#footnote-4)

It’s stunning.

But food waste isn’t just a hunger problem – it’s an environmental problem also. Think about the environmental impacts of all that wasted food.

* The water used to irrigate the crops was wasted.
* The fuel used in the tractor when it was harvested or shipped to the store was wasted.
* The electricity in the store that refrigerated the food was wasted.
* The jars and cans and boxes that held the food were wasted and then thrown away.

Not to mention that all of the labor and love that went into growing or packaging or manufacturing the food was wasted.

And of course the food itself was wasted.

All of these wasted resources result in water getting wasted - as much water every year as flows through the Volga– Europe’s largest river.

And, food waste generates a huge amount of greenhouse gas emissions. According to National Geographic, “the energy that goes into the production, harvesting, transporting, and packaging of that wasted food, meanwhile, generates more than 3.3 billion metric tons of carbon dioxide.

“If food waste were a country, it would be the world's third largest emitter of greenhouse gases, behind the U.S. and China.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

More and more, people are realizing that we must reduce our greenhouse gas emissions quickly if we want to prevent climate change from inflicting horrible suffering on millions of people. Climate change creates refugees. It drives poor farmers off their lands. It makes devastating storms even more powerful. And while it hurts everyone, it hurts the poor much worse. Climate change puts poverty on steroids.

And at the same time, we have hungry families. Families whose children don’t get enough to eat and whose young bodies and brains can’t develop properly because their stomachs are empty. Adults who are more vulnerable to disease because they are malnourished, or who lack the strength to work because they don’t have enough to eat.

We are taught to be grateful for the food we get yet we let it go to waste. We are taught to feed the hungry yet we are throwing perfectly good food away. We are taught to protect the earth, our common home, yet we cause harm, often without thinking about it.

We are hurting the people and the planet.

We can do better.

I’d like you to take a moment and think of a stranger you encounter that needs your help. They are out of a job, maybe out of a home. They come to you with their hand stretched out. Charity dictates that you help them. You reach into your pocket to find some coins you can spare to help them.

But as they approach closer, something is not right. Trailing behind them on the ground are coins that other people have given them – coins leaking from a hole in their pocket. You start to think that instead of giving them money that will also be lost as it falls to the ground, you should first start looking for a pin or maybe a needle and thread to help close the hole.

A fireman trying to put out a fire with a leaky hose would be smart to fix the leak first (preferably before its needed at a fire) so that every drop of water pumped into the hose can help extinguish the flames.

We – you and I – need to look at where there is a food hole in our lives so we can patch it up. We need to make sure that all of the food we have fills people’s stomachs - not landfills.

I started by saying that our tradition teaches that no one should be hungry and that we are supposed to help those who are. That we are part of the earth’s interdependent web of life. Often, these issues both feel so big, as if there’s nothing we can do about them. I’m here to say that this is wrong.

A response that all of us can make is to make sure that we use all of the food we have.

All of it.

We are blessed with food and should not be wasting that blessing. Ever. For the sake of hungry people. For the sake of our planet.

How does a problem like this get addressed? Obviously, there are some things that governments and businesses need to do. Improved roads and refrigeration facilities so that produce can get to market without being bruised or spoiled. More attention to policies that prevent food from going wasted.

But these changes won’t solve the problem if we don’t do our part. There are some simple, moral things that we all need to do so that we contribute to solving this problem.

* We can make the decision to buy just the food we need so we throw away less.
* We can accept that produce can be top quality and taste great even if it is a slightly odd shape.
* We can ask for a take-home container for food that we don't finish in restaurants.
* NOTE - PLEASE SEE THE <b>CALLS TO ACTION</b> SECTION FOR MORE OPTIONS

These may seem like small steps. But remember: the average US family wastes over 1,000 pounds of food each year. Are we, in this congregation, willing to commit to do better than that?

This weekend is the first Food Waste Weekend. At congregations of all faiths around the country, faith leaders are inviting their members to make a simple commitment: honor God by committing not to waste food. By committing to using the food you purchase. By taking home food from restaurants that you don’t eat. By being willing to buy produce that’s healthy and perfectly good, but that may not look like it’s been custom-grown for the vegetable equivalent of the Miss America pageant.

Think of this as the return of the “clean plate club” – with a conscience!

I want to invite each of you to make a pledge that you’ll do your best to make these simple commitments. Will you join in? I hope that you will.

Hungry people, and the good earth, depend on it.

1. <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2014/10/141013-food-waste-national-security-environment-science-ngfood/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <http://www.poverty.com/index.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/magazine/2016/03/global-food-waste-statistics/> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2014/10/141013-food-waste-national-security-environment-science-ngfood/> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2015/01/150122-food-waste-climate-change-hunger/ [↑](#footnote-ref-5)