

If you're really thankful, you wouldn't throw it away

At the mere mention of Thanksgiving, my mouth starts watering. The turkey, stuffing, mash potatoes, corn pudding, pie, and yes, sauerkraut (if you're from Baltimore). It's all so good. Spending time with family is nice, too, but the food, THE FOOD, is heavenly.

It has always been this way. At its very root, Thanksgiving is a holiday about giving thanks to God for providing food. We all know the historical origins of the holiday. (It's not a day for shopping... boo). We get all warm and fuzzy around Thanksgiving about being grateful for food, with most even donating food to those less fortunate.

Yet, I am calling the bluff this year. We have a major food problem in this country. Consider these two facts: according to a recent series on NPR, "Forty percent of all the food in this country never makes it to the table — at a cost of \$165 billion to the U.S. economy." Yikes! We throw away forty percent of our food! But, here's the real kicker. One in seven Americans do not have enough to eat. There is NO reason for anyone in twenty-first-century America to go hungry.

Here's additional statistics from NPR's report: 20 percent of all landfill waste is food, making it the number one form of waste, more than paper or plastic. If you're keeping track, that's 35 million tons of food. Just in case you missed it, we throw away 35 MILLION TONS of food every year.

Who's to blame? Clearly, some of the fault lies with businesses. Grocery stores stock an incredible variety of food and certainly some of that supply is not sold before it goes bad. Restaurants also tend to prepare more food than they sell. However, only half of food waste comes from businesses, the other half is from consumers. On a positive note, there has been a national push for grocers and restaurants to donate unused food, but on the flip side, there has been no effort for consumers to cut back on their waste. That's where you and I come in.

It is sad to see how much food is thrown away by American children. If you want to be depressed, stop by a school cafeteria and watch as children throw away whole meals, practically untouched. When I studied abroad for a year in Austria, I discovered they had strict laws about trash, and all biodegradable waste had to be collected separately. What shocked me is that the college's cafeteria had one tiny bucket for food waste for the entire student body. We were instructed to only take small portions, and that it was taboo to throw away food. Why is there no stigma in America for discarding food?

We all need to take collective responsibility in reducing food waste in our homes.

Here's a list of things we're doing (Please add to it in the comments below). First, buy only what you need. We switched to a weekly meal plan, and it hugely cut back on our amount of wasted food. We no longer have to stock all of the cooking essentials (It also reduced the amount we spend on food and our nightly stress around dinner time). Second, Tuesday is leftover night. I know it's popular, but every week, we pull out all our leftovers and make a hodgepodge dinner. Third, think about portion size. We cook a lot, but only put a little on our plate. This is especially true with our children. Lastly, rethink the shelf life of food. We keep leftovers in the fridge for one week, hence the weekly leftover dinner. All the fresh fruit that is on its way out goes into a smoothie. For canned and packaged good, the "best by" date is not an expiration date, but when the flavors start to decline. Of course, be safe, especially with seafood and meat products. (Gorgonzola cheese always gets me. It smells rancid the day you open it, so how do know when it goes bad!?)

If someone asked you for something every day, and you gave it to them every day, would you be upset, if you found out that they were throwing it away? I would. We pray, "Give us our daily bread." In other words, we ask for food every time we pray the Our Father. Our discarding of food seems ungrateful and duplicitous.

This Thanksgiving we need to do more than thank God with our mouths. We need to thank God with our actions. Oh, and does anyone have any good recipes for leftover turkey? I'll need it this Tuesday.