As Jesus sat near the Temple treasury, he watched the people as they dropped in their money. Many rich men dropped in a lot of money; then a poor widow came along and dropped in two little copper coins, worth about a penny. He called his disciples together and said to them, “I tell you that this poor widow put more in the offering box than all the others. For the others put in what they had to spare of their riches; but she, poor as she is, put in all she had—she gave all she had to live on.” Mark 12:41-44 GNT

How much is truly enough?

I mean surely that question has gone through your head at some time or another. Let me phrase it another way… how much can I put in the offering plate and not feel guilty about giving too little ... or not too much. I mean, just because you have a LOT of money doesn’t mean it should all go to the church right?

It’s like the church that told the District Superintendent… you keep em keen, we’ll keep em lean!

You can always tell the spiritual condition of a church by the way they keep there... anyone want to guess???

Their parsonage! The house where the preacher lives.

Friends of mine have been living in their current parsonage the past decade or so. And let me tell you, that house is literally falling down around their ears.

5 years ago, a mechanism in the front door broke. Now the door still works, but it sticks and you’ve really got to put your shoulder into it some days. The trustees of the church have the new door ready to go on, but as there is quite some finesse involved in mounting this particular kind of door, it requires a tradesman to put it in. It will cost the church around $160.

For 5 years the new door has been in storage because the finance team voted that they couldn’t afford to pay someone to put in the new door, and were waiting til somebody volunteered to do it for free. The door itself cost more than the installation will by the way.

Then there was the time that their hot water service broke down and sent water cascading through the roof. With no hot water, the pastor and family needed to go to a hotel, where they stayed for a couple of weeks which is how long it took for the trustees to buy and install a new hot water heater. You guessed it... some of the church members were grumbling and complaining that the minister was costing them money by staying in a hotel – even though it was covered by insurance. I mean surely the pastor and his family could put up with cold showers for a few days right!

The carpet is threadbare, the kitchen is falling apart, there are holes in the roof.

Now you would think that this kind of parsonage would be located in one of the poorest areas of the country right... and you would be incorrect. The town that this particular church and parsonage is in is one of the most expensive and most exclusive areas you could ever hope to live in - full of millionaires and multi millionaires. And yes, these same people are in the pews of the church.
You can sometimes tell the spiritual condition of a church by the way they keep their parsonage. The church building is always neat and tidy and well appointed in this town... but not the parsonage.

So... how much is enough when it comes to church. And that’s not just a monetary question, it’s a lifestyle question. How much is enough. How much time, how much money, how much of me do I invest in the church?

Each year, many churches receive donations of furniture or electronics under the guise of “the church could use it”. Consequently, some churches – not ours, but some churches are full of old television consoles and ratty chairs and pieces of furniture that Mr and Mrs Noah smuggled onto the ark.

When VCR’s were replaced with DVD’s, guess who ended up with extensive VCR collections and Video tape players?? The church. When cassettes gave way to CD’s, guess who ended up with all the old tapes people used to listen too – including tapes of sermons long since forgotten? The church.

It seems that sometimes the church is a couple of decades behind everyone else because if it was good enough for me to use then, it’s good enough for the church to use now.

We are taking a closer look at the third membership promise of a United Methodist today. Ashley spoke to us about the power of prayer, last week you either heard or read on email my sermon about the gift of your presence, but today we move onto promise number 3. Gifts... and the question... how much is enough.

When I was growing up, 20c was a fortune. 20c would buy you at the store a bag of mixed lollies. Now ‘lolly’ is the word we use for candy. Such was a bag of mixed lollies that you would find all sorts of treasures... and some of my enduring favorites til this day... chicos, strawberries and cream, mint leaves, jaffas, pineapples, jelly babies... one 20c bag of mixed lollies in the 1970’s would keep a kid happy for the rest of the day.

As a young boy, I was invited first to Sunday School by a lovely lady in our community, and after I started attending my parents came along as well.

On that first Sunday I remember with my Mom and Dad in church when the offering bag started to be passed around, I still remember my mom reaching over and pressing something in my hand, telling me I had to put it in the bag. I looked down, and there was 20c. (We don’t use quarters in Australia – we have 5c, 10c, 20c, 50c, $1 and $2 coins).

20c.

Do you know what you could BUY for 20c. A whole bag of mixed lollies. Enough candy to rot all your teeth out in one sitting. And this crazy woman wanted me to put 20c where!!! In that bag. Are you nuts.

20c to me was a fortune. And my little capitalistic mind began to try and come up with a way I could slip that 20c up my sleeve and make it LOOK like I was putting it in the bag. Problem with that was, a coin would always hit the other coins at the bottom of the offering plate, and if your coin didn’t make that coin on coin kinda sound – you were done for.

So I begrudgingly put it in the offering. For just a moment, I had held the whole world in my hands, and in the next moment it was gone. 20c.

These days, you only get about half the lollies you used to get with 20c by paying ten times that amount.
The widow who entered the temple on this particular day was probably not aware that she was about to be singled out by this young preacher who was visiting that particular day.

She was just there to make her offering.

Those that came before her dropped in bags and bags of money, and likely looked around with a big stooped grin to see just how many people had heard those coins drop into the treasury. The more you gave, the more important you must be.

There are many clergy who choose to know in detail what their parishioners give each week in the offering. I choose not too for this very reason. If I know who the big givers are here at the church, I don’t trust myself not to find myself preaching directly to them when I broach these kinds of subjects... or approaching them when I need a few extra dollars to pad out the church budget.

The other reason I care not to know is because I believe that those who give the most money do not deserve a better seat in the house – or a better position in the kingdom.

I don’t care if you dropped 2c in the plate this morning or 2 large... because ultimately you don’t answer to me when it comes to your giving... you answer directly to a much higher power. And trust me, you will answer.

When Jesus points out the woman with 2 mites, or 2 small coins, he doesn’t scorn her for the pittance she contributed. I mean it’s not as if the temple were going to upgrade the sound system or buy a new projector screen or paint the nursery thanks to her.

I’m glad that in this particular church, the rooms are named more appropriately than some rooms I have seen in other churches. The Mr and Mrs Smith Memorial Sunday School Room... or the John Jones Memorial Hall... and on and on and on. We immortalize the rich among us. You won’t often find a room or a church wing named after a homeless person who sat in a congregation, or a struggling single mother. Only ever after people who had lots of money and gave some of it.

Yet Jesus lifts up the one person that day in the temple who probably gave the least.

Widows didn’t usually have a couple of cents between them. They relied on extended family to support them in their widowhood... and that wasn’t hardly ever a recipe for financial success. Once your husband had died, you were penniless and homeless. Whatever estate your husband had – land, houses and all that – didn’t pass to the widow... it passed to the first born son. Or if there were no male heirs, it would pass to the appropriate brother and so on and so on. But never to the widow.

Yet this widow drops 2 mites... 2 cents into the temple treasury.

And what does Jesus say... “I tell you that this poor widow put more in the offering box than all the others. For the others put in what they had to spare of their riches; but she, poor as she is, put in all she had—she gave all she had to live on.”

Often times, the more you have, the less you give. I’m always shocked when folks die, and I’ve had this happen, leaving enormous pots of gold – yet the church they attended struggled for every lightbulb the entire time they attended.

But it’s not what you give that defines you... it’s how you give.
Do you give out of your abundance, or do you give of the first fruits of your harvest... your income.

Abundance is what we have left over. If there is an abundant crop of apples one year, it means there’s more apples than we know what to do with.

But giving the first fruits is a different story. Out of all that you have been given by Almighty God. And mark my words... if you think you are rich because of your own hard work or your own hand, think again.

I always marvel at how the heads of banks or senators or industry leaders can think to themselves “I deserve every penny I earn”... when the reality is that the person working down at the steel mill, or in the grocery store checkout line or even in McDonalds probably work twice as hard and three times as long.

You may have noticed that I’ve avoided using the word “tithing” thus far. That’s been deliberate. Giving 10% of your income for many is a great financial hardship... but giving 10% of our income for most of us is a complete financial cop out. Most of us give out of the abundance of what we have, not the first fruits of all we need.

So how much is enough.

I can’t answer that question for you. What’s your fortune? Is it money, is it time, is it standing on your head in a rainstorm... and how much of it are you prepared to give to God.

A couple of bucks... a couple of hundred bucks... a couple of thousand or more? God isn’t looking for specific numbers, he is looking for specific hearts. And it is God who speaks to each of our hearts urging us to give cheerfully, and to give first – before all the other things are taken care of.

Friends of mine in Tennessee decided many years ago when they were struggling financially that they were going to commit to the principal of tithing in their lives. I mean, they lived paycheck to paycheck, yet one day decided that God was calling them to give of the first fruits of their harvest.

So – even though that had a bajillion children who needed school shoes and backpacks and what not, they began the practice of tithing.

And suddenly, there was always enough for everything. The bills were paid on time. The creditors stopped calling as the credit card balance began to fall. The financial ship that was once floundering in rough seas began to right itself.

Today, this couple give a whole lot more of their income than just 10%. I don’t know how much they do give, except I understand its way way higher. Their story was featured in Christian magazine a couple of years ago, as they shared about the God who had helped them become financially stable because they trusted God and began to give not out of what they had leftover each month, which was nothing, but the first fruits of their harvest so to speak.

Like Ashley reminded us, prayer changes things. It doesn’t change God, but it changes us. And likewise, giving changes things. It doesn’t make God any richer, but I makes us all the better for it and all the more stable as well.
I once thought 20c was a fortune. Now I see it isn’t. But when I first put that 20c into the offering bag at Kyancutta Methodist Church, and watched my metaphorical bag of mixed lollies slip away out from my fingers, I knew deep down that my 20c was important to God.

Probably wasn’t in any way important to the church mind you... 20c might by some candy, but it ain’t going to pay the electric bill.

But the act of worship in giving can be so powerful and so profound that you can’t wait to see what God has in store for you yet. But remember, the dollar mount is always relative... the heart amount is always a little bit more. Amen.