The disciples are surprised when Mary pours a jar of expensive perfume all over Jesus’ feet. It’s important that this is one of the few stories about Jesus that is included in all four of the Gospels. The story is slightly different in each of the Gospels. The common thread is that people are surprised or indignant when a woman anoints Jesus with an enormous amount of expensive perfume.

Jesus’ way is not about doing things that people expect. Jesus’ way and God’s way are about doing something new and creative in the world. We have our traditions. God does not seem especially interested in our traditions. God does not follow the rules or expectations we have created. God does not even seem to be especially interested in helping out with our traditions or our expectations about the church.

This realization came crashing into my mind a few years ago. I was meeting with a group of my clergy friends from all different sorts of churches for coffee and tea at our regular place at the regular time, Wednesday morning at 8 a.m. We were sharing the news from our various churches. Every pastor seemed to have a story about the way churches in our different traditions were closing or fracturing or reducing their programs. The Presbyterians were in the process of closing two of the three Presbyterian churches in the city. The Episcopal church was moving from two services to one. The Disciples of Christ Church was contemplating the end of their annual national conference meetings. Two Lutheran congregations were combining into a single church. The Methodist pastor was concerned about the eventual, and now seemingly inevitable, split of the Methodists in America from the now ironically titled United Methodists whose primary desire seems to be to exclude Lesbian and Gay people from full participation.

So many churches were closing. So many churches were changing. How could this be happening? Could it be that all these pastors or congregations were complete failures? Could it be that all these churches were on the wrong track?

That was the day I began to place responsibility for this situation where it properly belongs: with God. That was the day I began to understand that God is doing something completely new in terms of the churches of the world.

Up until that moment I was quite content to place complete responsibility for the success or failure of these churches on their leaders and their members. Up until that moment I was always ready to give some critical response: “If only they had done this or that.” Up until that moment it was almost as if I had never heard these words from the prophet Isaiah: Thus says the Lord, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters. Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?

No, we do not perceive it. Speaking for myself, at least, I do not perceive it. At least it seems to be taking me a very long time to understand the new things God is doing in the world.

In order to understand the new things God is doing in the world I have to get myself out of a very familiar rut. In order to understand the new things God is doing I have to get away from my feeling that I am the center of the world; I have to get away from my feelings of entitlement.

This is what St. Paul is getting at in this rather manic passage from his letter to the Philippians. St. Paul is attempting to extricate himself and his listeners from their feelings of entitlement. If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

If Paul is sounding a little demented, a little narcissistic here, that is on purpose. Paul is more or less repeating back the arguments he has heard from the members of the church in Philippi about their entitlement. Their arguments about their confidence and their heritage and their entitlement stand for nothing in the eyes of God.
Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him.

We can claim entitlement. We can brag of our heritage. We can admire our beautiful vestments and make grand claims about our job titles, whether we are the bishop or the rector or the head cook or the head dishwasher. We can brag of our past achievements. As Paul would say, I regard them as rubbish. We have to lose something of ourselves. We have to lose our pride in what we have done. We have to lose our worship of the past and our past achievements.

What we did in the past may have been very important, but it is past. If we are alive we are living in the present. If we are living in Christ then we are paying attention to the new things God is doing today. We have to lose something of ourselves. Following Paul’s suggestion, we should be forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead.

If we hope to see what God is doing we can’t be giving all of our attention to the things we did ten or twenty years ago. If we hope to see what God is doing we can’t be giving all of the honor to things that were created one hundred years ago or one thousand years ago.

That doesn’t mean that we don’t study and appreciate our history. We have to know our past, but we also must understand that the past is past. God is very powerful but even God will not be doing any new works in the past. If we want to be part of God’s work we need to pay attention to what God is doing today. *Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?* No. Most of the time we do not perceive the new thing God is doing. We are often looking in the wrong place. We are often looking for the wrong things.

Here is a clue about the new thing God is doing. *Six days before he would be handed over to the authorities, put on trial and crucified Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus. Lazarus and his sisters gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him.* But the main event was not that Jesus was eating with a man who had been raised from the dead. The main event happened when Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, and anointed Jesus’ feet, and wiped them with her hair.

Again, it is important that this is one of just a few events, including the crucifixion, that are included in all four Gospels. What is this story about?

This is a story about compassion and kindness. Many other things happened at that dinner. The disciples ate food. The disciples argued about the value of the perfume. None of that makes any difference. The only thing that is truly important is Mary’s act of compassion.

The disciples are surprised by Mary’s act of compassion, and so are we. The disciples are ready to do a cost benefit analysis of Mary’s activity. Mary is only concerned about compassion and kindness. The only things that really seem to matter to Jesus and to God are compassion and kindness. *Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth.* There is one thing we know about this new thing that God is doing. It is a work of compassion and kindness.

One week ago one of the longest serving members of St. Paul’s died. Jeanne Greenhalgh was ninety years old. I loved Jeanne Greenhalgh. Today I realize one of the reasons why I loved Jeanne so much, and it has everything to do with our Gospel passage.

Jeanne paid attention to the people around her. Jeanne wasn’t perfect but she tried to do something kind, something to help. Especially for someone who was ninety years old, Jeanne loved people in the present tense.

That is what we are about as people who follow Jesus. We try to be like Mary. We try to love those who are especially in need of some compassion. We try to perceive the new thing God is doing. We try to love people in the present tense.