16 year old Nikki Leonti was an aspired Christian music artist who got her professional breakthrough when she signed her first a recording contract and released her first solo album back in 1998 called “*Shelter Me*”. That album made it all the way to #7 on the *Contemporary Christian Music* Chart. Grew up in a Christian family as a child of a Southern Baptist minister. The future looked bright for this teenage sensation with a powerful voice, some may even compared her to be the next Amy Grant.

However, like other teenage girls, Nikki had many other growing up issues that she must deal with, including many worldy temptations and influences. On top of all that, being a pastor’s kid didn’t help Nikki either. She was constantly being scrutinized under the microscope for everything that she does. Because she was a pastor’s kid, she was being held to a much higher standard, and that included her personal and social life as well. She could never be a typical teenager growing up.

At the age 17, Nikki began a dating relationship with her boyfriend and their relationship blossomed very quickly and soon they became romantically and sexually involved. To make the long story short, she became pregnant out of wedlock at the age of 18. As you would imagine, Nikki was shunned by her family, her church, and also by those in the Christian music community. Her career in music was put on jeopardy as her record company dropped her from their label. All of a sudden, her once promising music career vanished overnight because of a regrettable mistake that she made.

Nikki went on to carry out her pregnancy and delivered a beautiful and healthy baby girl at the age of 18. 16 years later, at the age of 34 after two failed marriages and two more children being born since with two different husbands, earlier this week, Nikki began another chapter of her comeback tour with her new husband Ryan and her 16 year old Jacelyn forming a trio-singing group on the stage of *America’s Got Talent.* They got four “Yes”s from the judges and will be advancing to the next round in Las Vegas.

So much has happened for the past 17 years for Nikki. She never claimed that her life was perfect….no one’s is either. So much has gone wrong, but somehow by the grace of God, she has kept her dream and passion in music alive. More importantly, she has kept her faith in God alive as well. It would be easy for society to point fingers at someone like Nikki and placed critical judgement upon her. **But who are we to be the judge of others….when we ourselves also live an imperfect life and would also one day be judged by God? Who are we to judge?**

Our text today also takes us to another woman who was shunned by society and was living on the edge. Ostracized by her community, this woman, who was never named, was only known as a “sinner” coming from the city. Often times that suggests that she might be a prostitute, but we cannot accuratelly make that assumption. She took a bold leap of faith but stepping out of her comfort zone. She came looking for Jesus by making her way through the crowd and drawing herself into the center of attention. This woman brought along an alabaster jar of ointment wanting to anoint Jesus’s feet. As you would imagine, other people noticed and began gossipping and spreaded like wildfire behind her back. *Who was she? What was her real relationship with Jesus? How could she afford to get her hands on the expensive alabaster jar for the ointment?*

This woman came only wanting to bathe Jesus’s feet with her own tears and to dry them with her own hair. Obviously this woman had a lot going on on her mind. After her annointing, she even kissed Jesus on his feet.

Throughout this whole ordeal, Jesus never stop her from doing what she did, nor did he publically shame her either because that would do even more harm than good. This woman came because she needed to be there. What had she got to lose, she’s already an outcast member of the community. She was willing to risk it all for a once-in-a-lifetime chance to meet Jesus…with no shame, no guilt, and no regret.

 We know very little about this woman. Contrary to popular belief, she was not Mary Magdeline either. We know nothing about her name, her family background, or whether she has a husband or not, those were irrelevant also. Perhaps the gospel writer was intentional that way, in order to keep our focus on what was really more important, not so much of one’s characteristics, but of one’s characters?

 “***Your sins are forgiven!”*** Jesus said to this woman, **“*Go in peace***”. Those were powerful words of healing that the woman exactly needed to hear! As one theologian commenting on this text wrote,*“Jesus was offering more than a forgiveness that merely wipes the slate clean. Jesus’ forgiveness lifts the burden of shame, to give her value and worth in spite of how unworthy she feels.”[[1]](#footnote-1)*

As usual Jesus took advantange of the opportunity as it presented itself, and turned it into a teaching moment addressing the issue of one’s confession and forgivness of sins. Jesus told a parable about someone who owed 500 denarii and another who owed 50. A denarius was equivalent to about the day’s wage for a day laborer. Both of these people could never pay back for what they owe but the gracious creditor cancelled both of their debts. Jesus asked Simon the Pharisee, *“Now, tell me, whose sins are forgiven more?*

Jesus wasn’t trying to publicly embarass Simon the Pharisee before his other guests, he was simply trying to make a point about God’s extravagent love and lavish grace that were made available to ALL, and not just to those who are considered the religious righteous and the social elites. Ultimately we come to believe that **one’s salvation is not based upon one’s obedience of the law, but through God’s grace and by one’s confession and faith in Christ alone.** This is the essence of our Christian faith!

However, there are multiple layers that we can unpack out of our story today. There’s the issue about judgment upon others, especially those who are marginalized. How often do we behave like the Pharisee when we rush into judgment upon others while we neglect to examine our own personal conduct and behavior? We pay more attention and place our judgement upon someone else’s shortcomings, his/her past history, family background, marital status, outward appearance, the level of education, occupation (or lack thereof), among many other kinds of “profiling” that we created? The list goes on and on and on. But going back to the question that I posed for us earlier, **who are we to be the judge?**

Throughout his ministry, Jesus placed heavy emphasis when it comes to hypocrisy and passing judgment onto others, as he taught his disciples, “*Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. 2 For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. 3 Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?[[2]](#footnote-2)*

Furthermore, we also notice how in this story, Simon the Pharisee was not only judgmental about the woman but he also was judgmental about Jesus as well. He even criticized Jesus that he was not a true prophet because otherwise he would’ve (and should’ve) known who was touching him. Jesus should’ve walked away from that situation and reprimanded the woman, but he didn’t. Jesus had compassion towards that woman and was willing to give her the second chance, even though she did not have the “perfect” track-record in life. No one does!

Day in and day out, Jesus challenges us to look beyond our human superficiality. We pass judgement upon others based on our own human standards. We’ve often set the rules and draw the parameters of who can be IN and who can be OUT. We belittle, humiliate, and shame others publically and behind someone’s back. If we don’t like it when others do that to us, then why do we still do that to others?

But instead, God has invited us to take a bold leap of faith by making new connections with those who are living on the edge, those who are marginalized and shunned by our human society, just like Nikki and this sinful woman “from the city”. Jesus was a bridge-builder who knows how best to connect all spectrum of human lives. He didn’t just care about the social elites, the “IN” crowd, but he cared and had compassion towards those who are looking in from the outside, those whose lives are less than “perfect” and in need of redemption through God’s grace and forgiveness.

Through our story today, we come to realize that God’s grace may come in different and unexpected sources. God will call upon people who live less than perfect lives and from the least welcomed categories of people. The woman came (as shameful as she might be) and was willing to pour out her “fragrance of love” and devotion at Jesus’s feet. She laid it all out there before Jesus.

This woman’s love for Jesus became a sign of God’s extravagant love for humankind. It reminds us that in spite of our human imperfection and flaws, God remains gracious unto us and is willing to give anyone a second chance in life. Our sins have been forgiven, our debts have been paid in full through the blood of Jesus Christ. How shall we respond to God’s extravagant love and unconditional forgiveness today? Whose lives will you impact and change today by sharing your gifts and God’s love to others? This is our calling, what is your response?

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, Amen.

1. *Holton, M. Jan Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 3, p.144* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Matthew 7:1-3* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)