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Five strong women
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inspired by Matthew 5:1-20

This is not a story from the Bible. But it was inspired by the story of Jesus and the woman caught in adultery, and by a real incident that happened in a church near our home. Names and details have been changed, but the story is true.

Anna hung back. She always hung around at the back of any crowd, because Anna could never believe she was really, ever, accepted by anyone.

Anna had been abused most of her life. She had been abused by both her alcoholic parents. She had been abused by her husband who finally left her with four small children. She had abused herself with alcohol.

Anna felt accepted by one friend. Marie was the minister at St. Andrews, and she had provided support, counselling and love for Anna. On several occasions, Marie had gone with Anna to make sure she got a square deal from the social service bureaucracy.

Anna, in spite of her pain, had a quiet but highly developed sense of humour. She loved to read, and often found delightful and quite funny stories, which she copied out by hand and passed on to Marie.

"My sermons would be a pretty bland stew without your stories," Marie said to Anna. "You're my salt-shaker whenever I'm cooking up a sermon. You put the flavour into my homilies."

Now Anna had become a grandmother. It wasn't a happy occasion, because Anna's daughter, Andrea, was only 16 and suffered from fetal

alcohol syndrome. Andrea wasn't very good at managing her own life. She didn't know who the father of her child might be.

But Anna and Andrea knew they wanted the new baby to have some kind of a chance at life. They were really going to try to break the cycle of abuse that had so damaged their own lives. They hoped the church could help them.

Andrea had joined the youth group at St. Andrews. And she wanted to have the baby baptized, though she had no words to say why that was so important to her.

"That would hardly be appropriate," said Janet. Janet was on the Board at St. Andrews. She'd been active in the parish for most of her 60 years, the "backbone" of the church. If you needed something done at St. Andrews, Janet could make it happen.

"I cannot see how it will be a good example to the other youngsters if Andrea is in the youth group. Imagine – an unwed mother. And as for baptism, it's out of the question. The church is called to set a good example. Jesus told us he had come to fulfill the law, and the law most definitely says that what Andrea has done is outside the law of the church."

This was at a meeting of the women's group. Marie was sitting right beside Janet. "You're absolutely right, Janet." Marie gave her friend's knee a friendly pat.

"But I think you've forgotten that Jesus said he had come to fulfill the law *and* the prophets. And those prophets were always going on about how we should look after the hurting people in our midst. They told us that God's law is love, and *that's* the law we've got to fulfil. Anna and Andrea have had more than their share of hurt. They deserve some love and acceptance.

"Besides, Janet. I'm that child's Godmother. And there's a big reception at my house after the baptism. I hope you'll come."

The last part of Marie's comment was a bit of a fib. She blurted it out without thinking. But right after the meeting she went over to see Andrea and asked if she could be the baby's Godmother.

"Yeah," said Andrea, somewhat surprised. "That'd be neat. Thanks." Andrea had no idea what a Godmother was.

"God sends these scriptures to us, just when we need them most," said Marie from the pulpit the next Sunday. Marie preached on Matthew 5:1-20. She looked right at Janet as she read the words "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets, but to fulfill." Then she caught her eye again as she read, "Whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven."

At the end of her homily, Marie read the passage again.

"You are the salt of the earth," she read, and looked out to catch Anna's eye. Anna heard and smiled.

"You are the light of the world," she read, and looked out to catch Janet's eye. Janet heard and swallowed very hard.

"Unless your righteousness *exceeds* that of the scribes and Pharisees," she read. She looked up to catch Janet's eye. But Janet was looking down at the prayer book on her lap.

Marie did not know that Janet was weeping. But the next day Janet phoned her pastor. "Could I make a couple of sandwich trays for the baptism reception?" she asked.

**Ralph Milton has written a number of books,
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