

The Real Mommas of the Church
Sermon For the Ordination of Deacons
June 18, 2005 The Rt. Rev. Stacy F. Sauls

One of the truest examples of love I have ever seen occurred when my son Matthew was about 4 or 5. As is not atypical, Mattie wanted to do something that was not good for him, and in this case, that was not safe. I think it might have been to jump off the roof or something. His mother had told him no. He had tried end-running her by coming to me. I also had said no. So, Mattie resorted to what he is best at—applying pressure. At first he was just persistent. Eventually, his persistence elevated to tantrum. But Ginger stood firm. Now, what you have to know to make the next part make sense is that both my sons are adopted and, of course, they have always known it. Finally, in utter exasperation and frustration, and I suspect no small amount of anger at not getting his way (funny, isn't it, how people of all ages become angry when they don't get their way?), he lashed out at Ginger in what I suspect he thought was the meanest, ugliest thing he could say and that might possibly result in him getting his way. "My real momma would let me," he screamed.

Now at this point, I considered hitting the floor for cover. I knew what a hurtful thing that must have been to Ginger to hear. "My real momma." I would not have blamed her a bit if she had either dissolved into a bucket of tears or hauled off and let Mattie have it. She did neither. Instead, she responded with utter calmness to Mattie's speculation that his "real momma" would have let him do whatever he wanted to do. Ginger said, "Maybe so, but I'm the one responsible for you if you get hurt and I'm not going to let you do it." Amazingly, that ended it. The tantrum ceased, and the "real momma" has never been mentioned again. Ginger spoke with authority. Not the kind of authority that comes from the exercise of power. Just quiet authority. The kind of authority that a servant has. As Mattie well knew, even at the young age of 4 or 5, in truth the real mommas are the real servants. "A dispute also arose among [the disciples] as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest. But he said to them, 'The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.'" On that night when he said this to his disciples, when he served them at his last supper, Jesus was a real momma. When he washed their feet, Jesus was a real momma. And when he gave his life for them on the next morning, Jesus was a real momma. Jesus has said that you will know his disciples because they will be the ones as mommas among us, as he was. Being a momma is not an easy job. Mattie has had the benefit of two of them. One was the woman who gave him birth and had the deep love to allow him to be adopted by people, half a world away, who could care for him in a way that she herself, for whatever reason, could not. I imagine that was at no small cost to herself and that it was a cost not undertaken lightly. It carries with it a real sense of servanthood. The other is Ginger, the woman who took another woman's child and

made him her own. She is the one who changed his diapers and stayed by his bed through the night when he was sick. It was she who bundled him up as a baby and stood in a New York snow storm trying to hail a taxi to take him to the doctor. It was she who cried with worry when he had surgery. It was she who did battle with the school teacher and principal who refused to understand his needs at great cost. It was she who worked to pay his tuition, who waits up for him when he is out with the car, and who mixed both tears and smiles when he graduated from high school last month. There is no doubt that Ginger is Mattie's real momma, too. And, in our house, there is no doubt what sort of authority being the real momma carries with it.

We gather today to set apart two people to be deacons in the God's holy catholic church. We are not setting them apart to be priests. They will have to be passed on yet again by the Commission on Ministry, the Standing Committee, and yes, lest they forget it, the Bishop, before that happens. It is interesting to me that we traditionally refer to priests as "father." That has changed, of course, with the ordination of women to the priesthood. But we have never called deacons "father." And we shouldn't. Deacons are the real mommas of the church. It is the real mommas of the church that carry the authority Jesus spoke about on that night when he gathered his disciples together one last time. It is interesting, I think, that we have equated another order of ministry, the priests, the "fathers," with being the leaders of the church. The leaders aren't to be the fathers at all. They are the mommas. Every real family knows the reality of this, of course. The man's name may be the first on the title to the house. The man's name might be the one we think of when the census form asks for "head of household." I suppose that is because it is the father who typically earns most of the money, and money as they say, is power. And the truth is that the authority in the family is, and always has been, held by the real momma.

Now, I will admit, deacons rarely conceive of themselves as the mommas of the church. In my experience, they way too often see themselves as the fathers in the most patriarchal of ways. God save us from deacons who confuse the diaconate, which is a matter of mommahood, with priesthood, which is a matter of fatherhood. It is the father who presides at the family dinner table. That is the priest's job, whether the priest is male or female. It is the momma who sets the table and stays in the background. That is the deacon's job. And it is the momma who remembers the family's stories, keeps birthdays and anniversaries, and knows who is related to whom. That is the deacon's job, to proclaim the story of Jesus, which is the Gospel.

And it is the momma who keeps the family's heart. It is the momma who bears the family's compassion. It is the momma who reminds the family to care for those of its members who are sick. It is the momma who teaches the children's hearts to bleed when they see suffering or injustice or pain. That is what the deacon does, call on us to bleed a little in the face of human need, often desperate human need, and to do something about it. I realize, of course, that I am on dangerous ground. None of the things I have mentioned are, in truth, necessarily gender specific. Men can care for children, change diapers, and sit by sick beds. Women can organize and direct and preside, just as well if not better than any man I've ever known. It is still true, though, that for whatever mysterious primal reasons it may be, women are the ones who teach us to serve others. Maybe that is because of role stereotypes over many millennia. Maybe it is because they have the hearts for it. I tend to think that it is

some of both. . It is not impossible that priests have hearts for compassion and service, of course. One hopes, indeed one expects, that all disciples of Jesus do. But we have deacons because we cannot afford to leave that necessity to chance. The priest does a very important job of calling us to the table of the Holy Eucharist to meet Jesus. This is not to be denied. But it is also true that the deacon does an equally important job, maybe more important, of speaking with a different kind of authority, the kind of genuine authority that comes with changing diapers and sick bed sitting. Authority in the church depends on it. More importantly, the authority of the church depends on it. Deacons are the guarantee that our life as the church is not about ourselves. Everything depends on that. So, Jon and Elise, I charge you to be our real mommas. That is the source from which your authority, all of it, will ultimately derive. It will not only be for you to change the diapers and sit by the sick bed, it will even more importantly be for you to lead us to do that. For Christ was among us as a real momma. It is for us to be the real mommas in the world around us. Amen. The Rt. Rev. Stacy F. Sauls, Bishop of Lexington