

While in college, I was introduced to the Litany of Humility which is, to my mind, one of the most difficult prayers to pray. It begins by asking to be delivered from the desire to be honored and loved and esteemed. It then goes on to ask to be delivered from the fear of being humiliated and despised, wronged and falsely accused. For me, it's literally a double-whammy. I first feel like I am praying against the deepest desires of my heart, and then I feel like I am being asked to allow myself to be humiliated, kept from the love I know I deserve. The prayer leaves me confused, unsure of what God is inviting me to.

I find it interesting that the opening words of this Litany are "Lord Jesus, meek and humble of heart, hear me." These words echo the verse chosen as today's Gospel Acclamation. There we hear, "Take my yoke upon you, says the Lord, and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart." In other words, before we can listen to the challenging words of the Litany of Humility... before we can listen to the challenging words of today's Gospel, we must first remember that we are being invited into the mysterious depths of Jesus' meek and humble heart.

Our Gospel opens by telling us that Jesus went to a dinner at the home of one of the leading Pharisees. The people there were observing Him carefully and were shocked to see Him willingly sit at the lowest place at the table, while they were busy jockeying for the best places to sit. This passage can sometimes be hard for us to understand since we are accustomed to facing each other in chairs while we eat. In Jesus' time, they ate at important feasts by lying down on their left side with their head towards the table. If you sat at the wrong place, you would literally be staring at everyone's back the entire night, unable to comfortably speak to anyone.

Jesus confused people when He willingly took the place of least honor, and then ironically they all had to turn around and face the other way to hear Him when He began to speak. At first glance, Jesus' words wouldn't seem very novel to the

Jews around Him. In Proverbs 25, we hear, “Do not put yourself forward in the king’s presence or stand in the place of the great; for it is better to be told, ‘Come up here,’ than to be put lower in the presence of a noble.” Rabbi Simeon commented on this proverb by saying that you should put yourself two or three places lower. It at first seems that the only novelty in Jesus’ words is that you should take the last place.

Perhaps Jesus was coyly trying to get invited to a better seat? Perhaps He was just reminding them about how to avoid embarrassment and gain some honor in the eyes of those around them? While it might seem like this at first, we know that this is not the case from the context of the story. Jesus begins by saying, “When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not recline at table in the place of honor... Rather, when you are invited, go and take the lowest place so that when the host comes to you he may say, ‘My friend, move up to a higher position.’”

The fact that Jesus began by speaking about a wedding feast might seem to be an inconsequential detail, but it is actually an important clue that Jesus was teaching about something much deeper than worldly honor. In Jesus’ stories, wedding banquets always refer to that eternal wedding feast in heaven where the last shall be first and the first shall be last. Ultimately, Jesus is teaching them a parable about what they must do in order to make it to heaven. They must humble themselves, taking the last place, so that God can glorify them and raise them up. As He says, “everyone who exalts themselves will be humbled but the one who humbles themselves will be exalted.”

Pause and think for a moment about this from a purely worldly perspective. Yesterday, we had a moving example of worldly humility when 15 year old Coco Gauff suffered a painful loss in the third round of the US Tennis Open. After the match, she began crying off court, and Naomi Osaka, the woman who beat her, promptly came over to comfort her, inviting her to share the spotlight with her at the

post-match interview. Naomi could have left Coco humiliated, and instead she lifted her up. It was an emotional moment that left few dry eyes in the stadium.

While pride can be defined in many different ways, underneath the sin of pride is the belief that I can only be exalted when others are brought low. Believe it or not, people who struggle with pride in this way tend to base their self-worth on what others think of them. The virtue of humility, of course, manifests itself as the opposite of this. Humility comes when we know that our own self-worth is not diminished when others around us shine. Therefore, the humble person willingly exalts those around them so that they may shine as well.

In the end, pride actually separates us from the love we desire, driving people away from us, while humility draws people towards us. This is just as true spiritually because pride separates us from God, making us depend on ourselves and our own merits, not His. Conversely, humility draws us towards God as we root our identity and self-worth in Him and His merits, instead of rooting it in ourselves and the things of this world. With this comes great freedom and peace from our fears as we realize that there is nothing in this world that can separate us from His love.

This of course, is not easy. If it was, then the Litany of Humility would not be so hard to pray! Yet, as we seek to live out the example of Jesus' humility in our own lives, we discover that there is a great difference between humility and humiliation. God is not asking us to go without love and be humiliated by those around us, but rather He is inviting us to humbly root ourselves in His love instead of the things of this world. This will in turn free us from our fears and allow us to take the last place, exalting those around us. In this, we will receive love in return as the as the brightness of their light helps us to shine brighter as well, until we shine brighter than the stars in the heaven, waiting for that glorious wedding banquet to come.