The Bible is not very kind to wealthy people. But, there are exceptions. Luke tells us a couple of times that wealthy women contributed to Jesus. Zacchaeus, the rich despised tax collector becomes a follower of Jesus. Later in the Gospel, we will meet Joseph of Arimathea who asks for our Lord’s body and then helps bury him in his own tomb. Many of the prophets of Israel, and especially Amos – from whom we heard today – had absolutely nothing good to say about the rich.

Such information does not sit well for us who live in the richest country in the world. We are a blessed people, rich by any standard when compared to the squalor and poverty in which more than half of earth’s humanity live. So scriptures like we heard today from Amos, full of judgment upon the rich who “lie on beds of ivory” hits us hard – or at least should hit us hard. Even those who struggle in our parish, in
this community, are considerably wealthier than the poor who live in cardboard huts in Rio, India, Haiti, Pakistan, and the Sudan.

In our Gospel, we meet a man of means in the well-remembered parable of Lazarus and the rich man. This parable is so well known that many scholars believe Jesus may have re-told a legendary story familiar to the people of that ancient land about the great reversal that takes place when we leave this life and enter the next. No doubt our Lord’s telling of the parable was influenced by the prophets, and the obvious divide between the wealthy minority and the poor majority in that first-century culture.

Come with me to a village someplace in the land of the Bible. We enter a neighborhood unlike anything we know today. Walls – high walls – cordoned off the property of the rich, securing both their house from the riff-raff, and the prying eyes longing to gaze into a life they would never know. Outside one of those walls, at a large, (no doubt very substantial gate), was a beggar named Lazarus. Every day, all day,
in every season, enduring every possible humiliation and circumstance, Lazarus sat at the gate the unnamed wealthy man.

We see Lazarus, as Jesus describes him in graphic imagery: covered with sores licked by the prickly tongues of dogs, hungry, longing to taste even a dry crumb that might fall from the wealthy man’s table. One day, Lazarus died. When his life ended, he “was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham.” As the story continues, the rich man also died. When he died, he was buried and suddenly found himself in the habitation of the dead believed to be a place of punishment, and hopefully purification, called by the Jews “Hades”. It was there, in that place of pain, that we hear the rich man speak.

Seeing Lazarus across the great chasm between Hades and the company of the blessed, Lazarus now clothed, fed, and cared for, the rich man cries out, “Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.” Mind you, this man is in a very bad place.
His options are zero unless mercy comes to him from the land of eternal life.

Abraham disappoints the rich man. There will be no mercy for him. Why? Because a great reversal has taken place from which no one returns. Lazarus, he tells him, knew nothing but hunger, pain, and privation outside the rich man’s gate while inside that gate; this man knew nothing but comfort, wealth, and security. Then it happens! Unfazed by Abraham’s response, the rich man starts giving orders, telling Abraham to send Lazarus back to human existence to warn the man’s brothers lest they come to the same end.

The story ends as Abraham reminds this clueless man the gig is up. Lazarus will not be sent on this mission, by him or by anyone else. Why? Because “If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.”
A tiny detail in this parable has my attention. It the moment when
the rich man orders Abraham to send Lazarus back to warn the man’s
brothers of the consequences that come to a life out of touch with what
life really means. Even in death, this rich man, (who no doubt ordered
scores of people around in his business, his household, and community),
did not get the fact that he was no longer in charge. The giving of orders
was no longer his prerogative.

Isn’t it telling that we who occupy this human experience think
that we have the right to call all the shots in life? We prefer no
constraint: no “shoulds”, no “oughts”, no “musts”; while at the same
time, expecting others to do our bidding following our orders. This
parable paints in bold colors what one noted biologist called “the selfish
gene”. We want life our way, on our terms, and most of the time, to our
benefit.

This poignant parable seems to make us look ourselves squarely in
the mirror and ask: Am I like that? Am I living in such a way that others
are bearing some burden because I to do whatever I please? Does what I want, and what I can buy, and how I live, impact anyone else? And if it does, what right do I have to give anyone any orders about anything? Is “the selfish gene” controlling my life?

Both the lesson from the prophet Amos and this parable speak a prophetic word of judgment to us about wealth, possessions, our concern or lack of concern for the poor, and God’s countercultural perspective on what endures. But it seems that those things – as powerfully present as they are in our scriptures today – may keep us from asking ourselves the hardest question of all. “Am I an orders-giving, me-centered person? And if I am, do I have the grace to confess it, own it, and choose to live a better way?”

Such is the judgment within the parable and the challenge we take with us today. The table before which we sit and the gifts here which soon will be food and drink for us, tell us that on a dark Friday, Jesus Christ refused to give orders to anyone. He laid down his life for us to
show us the way of life is the way of love, not of privilege; of generosity and sacrifice, not selfishness. Giving orders just doesn’t seem to square with the One who gave his life for us, does it?