If we look out at the world at some point we will see an inconsistency between how people behave and the things that happen to them in their lives. To put this phenomenon in terms we are familiar with we ask the question of why do bad things happen to good people or conversely why do good things happen to bad people. And this is by no means a new question, in the Old Testament the prophet Jeremiah asked, “Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why do all who are treacherous thrive?” The Psalmist acknowledges the phenomenon but tells us to not worry about it when they say, “do not fret over those who prosper in their way, over those who carry out evil devices.” Now there are various answers given to why this happens, answers like the existence of free will and the depth of our sin. Some answers even go so far as to propose a fatalist interpretation, which argues that everything happens for a reason and that it is only from our lack of understanding that we are unable to see the goodness in seemingly terrible things like murder, famine and movies staring Brad Pitt. But, we are in Church, so let’s take a moment and see if the Bible has anything to say in answer to this question, and fortunately it seems to.

This answer is found in our Old Testament lesson. And while it may seem hidden at first glance it occurs in the context of the seeming debate between Abraham and God. The subject of the debate is the wickedness of Sodom and Gomorrah and what to do about it. The proposal that God seems to have put on the table is to turn those places into parking lots, following the logic of the U.S Air Force that rubble doesn’t make trouble. Abraham is opposed to this solution and says, “Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will you then sweep away the place and not forgive it for the fifty righteous who are in it?” God replies to this question by saying, “"If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will forgive the whole place for their sake." Abraham then decides to push the issue a little more by lowering the number to forty five to which God responds, “I will not destroy it if I find forty-five there." Abraham not satisfied with this drops it to forty then thirty then twenty to which God again responds that he will not destroy it if any of these numbers are found there. Abraham finishes by asking about ten to which God responds, “For the sake of ten I will not destroy it." Or if you prefer the Dr. Seuss version God says for the sake of ten he will not destroy it here or there he will not destroy it anywhere.

This passage can be a bit confusing because from a certain angle it appears that a human is functioning as God’s moral compass. That is God was planning to do something a little rash and Abraham had to step in and teach him a thing or two about good behavior. And while I can see where people might get that idea, I think that it is more God demonstrating to Abraham that he is bound by the same moral rules that he expects us to be bound to. That is God, who is perfectly capable of raining fire down from the sky, does not because his nature follows the same moral compass as he asks us to follow. Our God is not a do as I say not as I do type of God like Hephaestus or Dionysius. And as interesting as this discussion as it might be to determine just what sort of influence Abraham had on God I think the bigger question that is answered here has to do with how the wicked continue to thrive.

The tendency of this story is to think that God agreed to spare the nice righteous people, which is true, but in doing so he has saved the murderers, thieves, child molesters, and the people who came up with the policy to close the doors for boarding ten minutes before your flight is actually scheduled to leave. In order to preserve a remnant of righteous people the unrighteous are allowed to continue on with their moral depravity. And we may not like this reality; we would perhaps like God to operate with a little more laser like precision, eliminating the bad people while sparing the good. But is it really quite so simple? Are people really that easily heaped into groups of good or bad? Or does this divide run right through the middle of us? Do we have good days and bad days or maybe good minutes and bad minutes? I mean I assume that there is a reason we do the confession of sin every time we come to church. This action seems to imply that all of us have sinned fairly recently. The discussion that Abraham has with God about the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah could just as easily be a discussion with God about ourselves. Abraham could have said, “Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there is 50% righteousness found within me; will you then sweep away the place and not forgive it for the 50% righteousness that is found within me?” And while my wife says that I too often tell you that you are just a bunch of miserable sinners I think there is actually something very positive to draw from this. If we are to plead for ourselves to be saved because some goodness exists in us then by default we are also pleading for others to be spared because some goodness exists within them. Just as the unrighteous must be spared in order to save the righteous, the rest of humanity must be spared in order for us to be spared.

Now quickly before I go on I need to point out that what I am discussing is not our eternal state, that is I am not saying that everyone goes to heaven because we all have a little righteousness in us. Rather what I am saying is that God withholds his judgment on us while on this earth in the same way he withheld his judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah. And while the text does not delve into the specific reasons for doing this, I assume he does so partly in the hope that the righteousness will grow and the unrighteousness will shrink. That is he hopes that we are going to get a little better and that our path on this earth will be one where we seek to grow in our love and knowledge of Him. Or if we want to get all prayer book-y about it he is looking for us to delight in His will and walk in his ways.

So here is my mild suggestion to come from this understanding of the world, let us extend the same grace to one another that God extends to us. If God spares us because we are not totally rotten then can’t we give some grace to everyone else because they are not totally rotten? And I know this is not easy, because it is so much fun to get upset by others shortcomings. I mean much of the business model for the internet and other media companies relies on the demonizing of those with whom they disagree. And much of our morality these days hinges on not being like those people of whom we disapprove. But as the old saying goes, “In the land of the blind, the one eyed man is king.” We cannot gloss over our own wrongs by highlighting the wrongs of others. Just because we can find shortcomings in others this does not make us paradigms of goodness. Just like Sodom and Gomorrah, we are spared because there is some good within us, but all that should do is encourage us to cultivate more good. We worship a very loving and tolerant God, but also a God whose strongest wish is to see us living the life that he has called us to. Seeking his will in all things both now and forevermore.