

Same Kind of Difference as Me (2017)

Rated PG-13. Running time: 1 hour 59 min.

Our content ratings (1-10): Violence 2; Language 1; Sex/Nudity 1.

Our star rating (1-5): 4

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

1 Corinthians 13:5-7

First-time director Michael Carney's race-relations film is a bit simplistic, but it easily beats out most faith-based films—meaning, for this reviewer, it shows rather than preaches. The screenplay, by Carney, Alexander Foard, and Ron Hall, is based on the best-selling nonfiction book with the unwieldy title of *Same Kind of Different as Me: A Modern-Day Slave, an International Art Dealer, and the Unlikely Woman Who Bound Them Together*. It chronicles the real-life story of wealthy white Texan art dealer Ron Hall and Denver Moore, a Louisiana-born African-American homeless man. Ron's wife Deborah was the catalyst that brought the two together.

The film begins with Deborah (Renée Zellweger) confronting Ron (Greg Kinnear) with his infidelity and demanding that he choose either to split up or to accept her forgiveness—with the proviso that he does what she asks in the years ahead. He accepts, and reluctantly accompanies her to the Gospel Union

Mission when she volunteers to work in its soup kitchen. His first encounter with Denver Moore (Djimon Hounsou) is not an auspicious one, the angry black man striding into the hall holding a baseball bat in a threatening position. The bat is constantly with him, and during one of his visits he uses it to smash a glass window, on which ironically are engraved a portion of 1 Corinthians 13.

Love is what Deborah embodies, so she continues to respond calmly to the angry black man when he comes through the serving line. Ron is upset that Denver never thanks them for the food, but at the urging of his wife, he does go over to the area where the homeless man ekes out his living with other homeless people. Deborah's reason for reaching out to Denver is a dream that she had about meeting a wise man on the road who would change her life. Despite his anger, she believed Denver to be that man. Suspicious of their motives, Denver rebuffs them continuously. Later, after they have become friends, he reveals that his past had made him believe that all whites were racists ready to break into violence the moment he stepped across a line. Son of share croppers, as a boy he had been good friends with a white boy. One day the two had discovered in a shed KKK regalia owned by the white boy's father. They tried on the robes, and when the boy's mother caught them, Denver was beaten. As a young man he had also suffered a beating when he tried to help a white woman with her broke-down car, and a group of white toughs came along.

Ron finds himself enjoying Denver's company, but suffering disapproval of wealthy white friends when he treats Denver to lunch at his club. At about this point I began to have some misgivings about the film becoming one more tale of Noble Whites Rescuing Deserving Blacks, this being almost a subgenre of films exploring race relations. The real Ron Hall must have worried about this as well, for in an interview the author has said that his story is not about a wealthy "art dealer millionaire that saved this poor, African-American homeless

man. Nothing could be further from the truth. This man saved me from myself.” And we might add, it is about a woman of faith whose love reached out to an unfaithful husband and then a suspicious homeless black man.

Renée Zellweger and Greg Kinnear are both excellent as the philanthropists, but it is Djimon Hounsou whose performance you probably will remember the longest. As he opens up to Ron more, the once anger-consumed man becomes the wise man Deborah had seen in her dream. In an art museum to which Ron takes him he offers an interesting observation on a Picasso painting, and at the end of the film it is he who provides the name of the film in his eulogy honoring Deborah.

Inside, Denver says, we are all the same, despite our outward differences. That racial relations could be improved by whites acting kindly toward blacks is no doubt true. But this personal approach to racism, favored by most conservative Christian is far short of solving the problem. It too often ignores the systematic, built-in racism that needs changing. It suggests too that the problem of homelessness can be solved by the generosity of two wealthy whites who live in a 15,000-square foot house rather than making changes in the attitude of the general public and in government programs (or lack of the latter). It is encouraging that Ron gave up his lucrative art dealership to join with Denver as advocates for the homeless (Denver even moved into his friend’s home to live with him), but I hope that in their many travels on behalf of their cause they moved beyond a narrow personal approach to deal with the many, complex reasons why persons become homeless.

Despite the above, this is a film worth seeing.

This review with a set of questions will be in the November 2017 issue of VP.