

Amazing Grace and Chuck (1987)

San Francisco 49er Colin Rand Kaepernick has started quite a trend in support of the Black Lives Matter Movement. While reading TIME Magazine's cover story about him and his spreading protest I thought of a 29 year old film that I have loved over the years because it dealt with a Little League ballplayer starting a protest movement that soon spread to major sports stars in this country and beyond. It is a peacemaking film that takes seriously Thoreau, Gandhi, and Martin Luther King, Jr. What in the film seemed so far fetched that it was pitched as a "Once upon a time story," a fairy tale for peacemakers, has now become a reality, with the film's nuclear destruction replaced by endemic racism in society in general and police departments in particular.

Rated PG. Running time: 1 hour 54 min.

Our contents ratings (1-10): Violence 2; Language 1;
Sex/Nudity 0.

Our star rating (1-5): 5

*The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down
with the goat,*

*the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little
child will lead them.*

Isaiah 11:6

*...any man more right than his neighbors constitutes a majority
of one already.*

Henry David Thoreau, Essay on Civil Disobedience

But wouldn't that be nice?

Amazing Grace Smith

Director Mike Newell's 1987 film *Amazing Grace and Chuck*, reflecting the major fear of the Cold War, nuclear annihilation, is set forth as an adult fairy tale, beginning with, "Once upon a time there was a boy." His name is Chuck Murdock (Joshua Zuehlke), and he becomes upset during a tour of a nuclear missile silo in the Montana prairie when he is told that his sister and everyone else for miles around would be obliterated by a missile strike. The 12 year-old decides to give up the thing he likes best, pitching for his Little League baseball team, until all the weapons are dismantled.

Chuck is the star player, and this is the year when they have a chance to go all the way to the state finals. His coach and fellow team members are upset and perplexed by his protest, as is his father Russell (William Petersen), but Chuck, slow at being able to explain his act, still refuses to play. The villagers think he is being weak and unpatriotic, willing to trade the nation's security for peace at any price.

The reporter for the local newspaper writes about the boy's refusal. Being somewhat unusual, the story is picked up by a wire service, and across the country Amazing Grace Smith (Alex English), super star for the Boston Celtics, is intrigued when he reads the story. He expresses his wonder to his agent Lynn Taylor (Jamie Lee Curtiss) as to why the boy would do this, but she dismisses it.

However, Amazing Grace decides, on the way to play the Seattle Seahawks, to stop by the Montana home to find out what motivates Chuck. The athlete is still bothered by the death of his wife and young daughter, so he has apparently been thinking about the deeper things of life. Impressed by the somewhat inarticulate boy, he also drops out and moves to the town. Soon his friends from the Miami Dolphins charter a plane

to find out what has gotten into their crazy friend, and, impressed, they drop out too.

And so it goes around the world, Chuck having started an international protest against nuclear arms. His father, a pilot in the Air National Guard, does not approve of what his son is doing, but, as he explains in an argument with Chuck, he believes that he should not force him into a decision. Indeed, late in the story, after a tragic setback, the movement becomes a new Children's Crusade, when children and youth throughout the world add to the protest by refusing to talk to adults.

The movement escalates until the U.S. President (Gregory Peck) and the Soviet Premier (Vasek C. Simek), engaged in disarmament talks, enter the picture. The pressure on Chuck to return to baseball so that the two leaders can reduce their stockpile of weapons is immense, but Chuck will not go along, demanding that *all* weapons be scrapped. However, there are sinister international business interests that require stability and predictability if their profits are to continue, and these are upset by the movement headed by Chuck and Amazing Grace. An industrialist/financier contacts Amazing Grace with a grim unveiled threat. Thus one of these now two prophetic leaders will be forced to bear a cross, following in the wake of a long line of brave protestors stretching back to Christ and the Hebrew prophets.

Director Mike Newell, still at work after directing 80 films (including the first *Harry Potter* film and *Four Weddings and a Funeral*) has given us a wonderful "what if?" kind of film, as well as one in which the conflict between a father and son is fairly resolved in the end. Though the Cold War and 1987 are long gone, the film is still entertaining and inspiring by speculating about what a difference even a young boy can make in our world when he is sincere and persistent. The screen turns black at the end, and printed upon it are some words that Amazing Grace had said to Chuck's skeptical Dad earlier

about the removal of all nuclear weapons, "But wouldn't it be nice?"

This review with a set of discussion questions will be in the October issue of Visual Parables.

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