

Gracie's Journey

Kathy Dawson

Over the years, while One Great Hour of Sharing themes have come and gone, one element has been constant — the fish coin box.

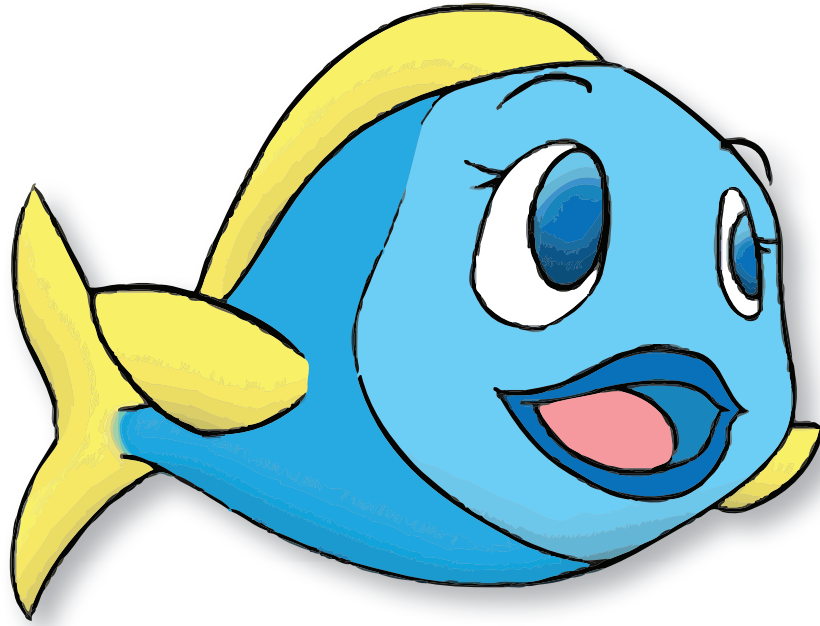
In 2006, the Little Fish story became one of many OGHS resources. There was a contest to name the fish that elicited more than 1,200 entries. The name selected by our panel of judges was Gracie, submitted by Second Presbyterian Church of Elizabeth, New Jersey, who received a large stuffed version of the fish created by In Stitches, a liturgical fabric arts studio in Chagrin Falls, Ohio.

We hope your children will follow Gracie’s adventures over the years as she learns how God’s action through us can change our lives as we try to help others change theirs.

Thank you again for your efforts in helping children learn to reach out in love to their siblings around the world.



ONE GREAT HOUR OF SHARING
SPECIAL OFFERINGS
HUNGER • DISASTER • DEVELOPMENT

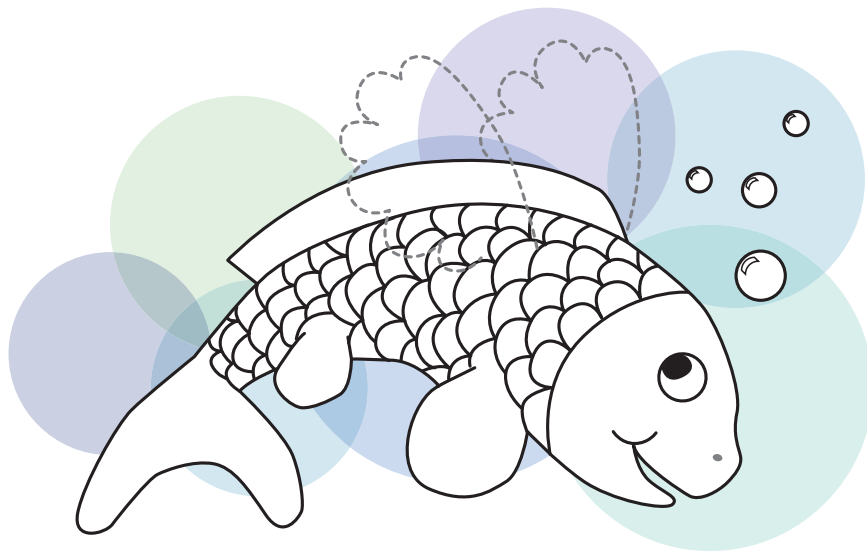


Gracie's Journey

Kathy Dawson

CONTENTS

The Little Fish with Invisible Wings	3
Little Fish Finds Her Name	7
Gracie and the Two-Legged Fish.	12
Gracie's Treasure	16
Gracie and the Sea Star.	20
Gracie Finds Joy.	25
Gracie and the Great Pearl.	31
Gracie and the Big Storm	35
Gracie Becomes a Neighbor.	40
Gracie and the Food Desert.	45
Gracie Meets a Sea Slug, One Spirit: Different Gifts.	50
Gracie and the Reef Mender	54
Gracie and Friends Use Their Gifts.	59
Gracie Makes a Coral Covenant	64
Gracie Helps a Hermit	70
Gracie and the Fishing Net	75
Gracie Finds Her Gift	80
Gracie and the Green Sea Turtle	84
Gracie and the Birthday Party.	90



The Little Fish with Invisible Wings

The little fish didn't know fish could have invisible wings. Most fish you'll ever see have fins. Some of them will look like wings, and some like hands, a few like shovels, a lot like fans. Some fish can get out of the water and crawl around on their fins, even though they won't win many races. Some can even break out of the water and fly for a little while.

But the little fish had never seen a fish with invisible wings. At least she didn't think so. Or he didn't. You see, the little fish didn't even know if she was a he, or he was a she. Nobody had ever told the little fish, maybe because nobody ever noticed him. Or her. Tell you what. Since we don't know whether the little fish was a boy or a girl, I'm going to call her a him one time, and call him a her the next, OK?

And while I'm at it, I may as well tell you that The Little Fish isn't the little fish's name. You see, when the little fish was born, the rest of the Fish family paid attention to all the other newborn fish, who were all bigger than the little fish. And before you know it, they'd stopped giving out names, so the

little fish didn't get one. But since everyone called the little fish the little fish, pretty soon the little fish started figuring that's who she was.

Well, this is the story about how the little fish found out about his wings. Well, as I said, nobody paid a lot of attention to the little fish. Deep down, it didn't make her feel so good. He would really have liked it if someone had told her, "Don't go out in the big wide ocean alone, and never go out when the big fast fish are swimming by.

They'd like nothing better than a little fish snack." But nobody told him what to do, so she had to learn these things on his own. Sometimes she hung out on the edge of the reef where the big ocean fish liked to stop in and tell stories. She was so little, most of them didn't notice him, so she just listened to their stories.

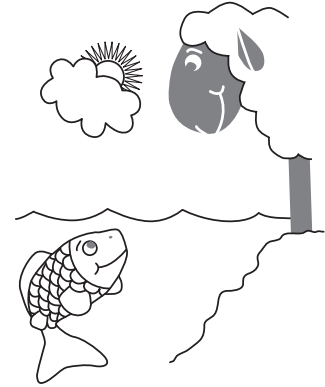
One day, a big old codfish was telling a story of a close call he had just had. "I was off the coast of India when I heard a big boom. The next thing I knew, I was at the top of a 30-foot wave, running really fast toward the shore. I tried to get out of there, but the wave was moving faster than I could swim, so before I knew it, I was lying on the beach there, with all kinds of smashed up houses, while the wave kept on going farther up on the land. Just when I thought I was a goner, the wave washed back out to sea, carrying me with it. Me and a lot of cows and houses and people, and they were all calling for help."

When he heard this, the little fish felt a funny, dizzy feeling inside. If you've ever been seasick, you'll kind of know what it felt like. But fish don't get seasick, so the little fish didn't recognize the feeling. Before she knew it, he was in a strange place, with a lot of things floating all around her. He saw a strange four-legged thing splashing around and realized it couldn't swim.



She was too small to do anything by himself, but she called some of the other little fish, and together they pushed and pushed and pushed, and before long, they had pushed the lamb (for that's what it was) into shallow water where it could run back up onto land.

Then, just as fast, the little fish found himself back at the edge of the reef. She wondered what had happened. Then he saw an old flounder winking at her from the floor of the ocean. "First time you ever did that, I'll bet," the flounder said. "Scared me, first time it happened."



"But what was it that happened?" the little fish asked.

"Oh, you just found your heart wings," said the flounder. "You heard something that made you feel sad inside. When that poked a little hole in your heart, your heart wings sprouted out and flew you there in an instant. You must have a pretty big heart. Most fish can't fly that far their first time."

"Were you there too?"

"Yes, I was there along with a lot of others, helping to push some of those animals and people back to land. You didn't think all those fish just showed up by accident, did you? They came from all over the world when they heard about that terrible wave and everybody that was in danger from it. Together we all helped to save a lot of lives."

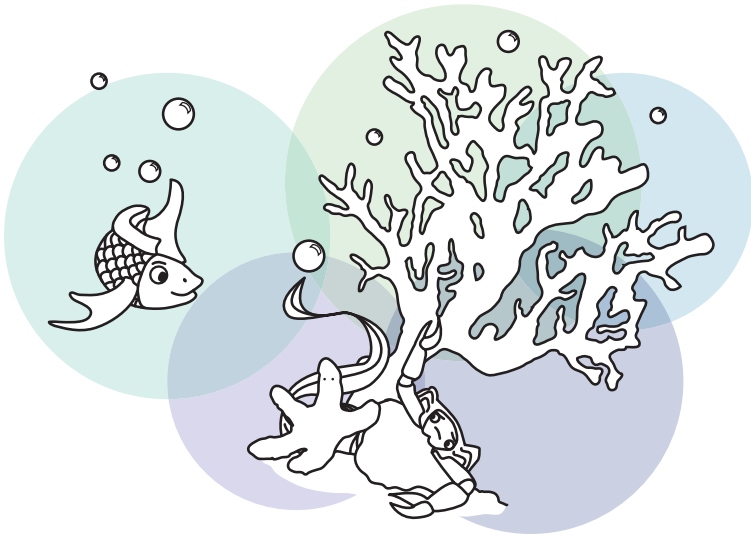
"Do all of us have heart wings?" the little fish asked.

“Well, all of us can grow them, but some of us don’t know it and don’t ever give them a chance to grow,” the old flounder said. “They get stronger the more you use them; but some of us don’t like that funny feeling. I expect you got that feeling just before you flew to India, right? You got sad and your heart reached out and took you there. Well that feeling makes some of us pretty uncomfortable, so they never get to know what it’s like to really use their heart wings.”

“By the way, I’m Wise Old Sole. My real name is J. Gustavus Phlatfyshe Sole, but most folks call me Wise Old, ’cause I’ve been around so long. What’s your name?”

The little fish felt very embarrassed. “I — I guess I don’t really have one. But most everyone calls me the Little Fish.”

The flounder laughed. “Yep, I guess that sounds like a pretty good name for now. But I expect that as you grow up, you’ll find the name that fits you — or it will find you.”



Little Fish Finds Her Name

Little Fish wanted to know her name more than anything. She saw her neighbors Angie Angelfish, Benji and Belinda Butterfly Fish, and even Efraim Eel. They all had names. Everyone in her school had a name, but she was still just Little Fish.

Last year when she had asked Old Codfish about her name, He simply said, “All in good time.” Wasn’t this a good time? It was so hard to wait. She now knew that she was a girl fish, that she lived someplace called the Red Sea (even though it was more blue than red), and that there were many other fish who looked like her and swam around together in a school. She knew all these things that made her like the others in her neighborhood, but she wanted so much to know what was special about her.

Little Fish swam in between branches of the fan coral. It was hard to believe that each of these branches was a whole neighborhood, too. Tiny creatures lived in each of these little holes or had at one time. They were even smaller neighbors than she was.

As she swam happily in the warm water, Little Fish also needed to watch for unfriendly neighbors. There were those fish that she had been taught to fear — fish like hawkfish, sharks, and groupers who were said to eat little fish like her. If she saw one, her plan was to swim very quickly into the fan coral and stay very still. Maybe the unfriendly fish would think that she was part of the coral and leave her alone.

Little Fish felt the fear of the other fish before she saw the large grouper. It was swimming very quickly toward her school, which swam in all different directions away from the large fish. Little Fish followed her plan, swimming into the center of the fan coral and staying as still as she could and still remain in one place. The grouper chased the other fish one way and then the other, but the little fish were too fast for him.

Then he spied Angie Angelfish on the other side of the branch coral. She was so afraid that she couldn't move. Little Fish couldn't do anything but watch in fear as the grouper swam closer to Angie.

The grouper tried to make a quick dart through the coral to catch Angie, but somehow got wedged between two branches. Angie swam away to safety. Little Fish sent a bubble prayer of thanks to God for saving Angie.

Little Fish was still afraid to move. The grouper was struggling to free himself from the coral. What if she came out of her hiding place and the grouper suddenly became unstuck? All the stories she had heard about groupers came back to her. They were mean. They were not to be trusted.

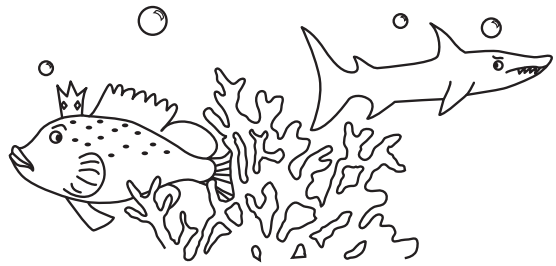
And yet, when she looked at the grouper, she couldn't help feeling sorry for him. He was trying so hard to free himself that he was actually scraping his

sides on the sharp coral. The algae that surrounded the old homes of the coral creatures was now tangled around his fins.

“Someone should help him,” she thought.

At this point Queen Blue Spot swam by. She looked at the grouper and swam away. “Why didn’t she help him?,” thought Little Fish. “They are fish of the same kind. She is queen of her group and yet she did not stop.”

Shortly after, Sammy Shark swam up from the sandy bottom. “Surely this fish will help the grouper. He is a famous fish who all the others think is a hero.” But Sammy Shark kept right on swimming without even slowing down.



By this time the grouper was getting tired. He struggled less. It almost looked like he was crying. He didn’t look so scary to Little Fish. Maybe she could do something to help. She remembered a story she had heard that was first told by God’s own son, Jesus, about a Good Samaritan who helped a neighbor in need.

Very quietly she swam out from her hiding place and stopped a little way from the grouper. He looked at her with very sad eyes.

What could such a little fish do to help him? When the others swam by without stopping, he had given up hope.

Little Fish thought very hard and then began to chew on the algae that was wrapped around the grouper’s fins. This was very hard work. It would be so much easier if there were others to help.

This gave her an idea. She went to find all her neighbors and those in her school. She told them her plan. At first they were as afraid as she had been, but when she talked about how the grouper had struggled, how the others had swum by without helping, and how sad his eyes looked, they decided to help. After all, as Benji Butterfly Fish observed, “This grouper is probably too tired and too hurt to think about eating us.”

All her neighbors began to chew on the algae. The grouper’s eyes opened even larger to see so many of these little fish helping him. When they had freed him from the algae, Efraim Eel gave him one big push from the rear with his head. The grouper popped right out of the branch coral and smiled a shy grin as he turned to thank his new friends.

“My name is Gus,” he said. You have taught me what many fishes all working together can do to help others. Yesterday I would have called you my enemies, but today you are my neighbors.”

Angie Angelfish turned to look at Little Fish. “It was her idea,” she said.

“Thank you ... I’m sorry, I don’t know your name,” said Gus.

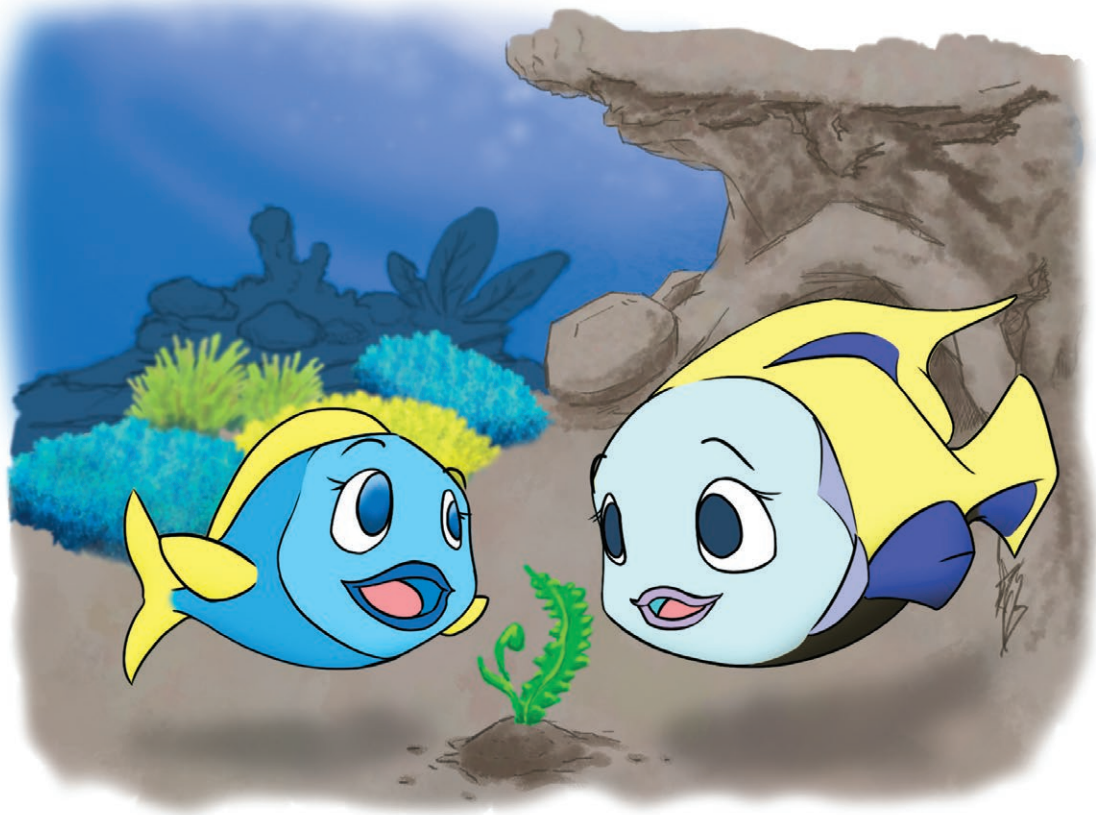
At that moment the Old Codfish, who had been watching from behind Efraim Eel’s cave, swam quickly to the center of the group, and said, “You may call her Gracie.”

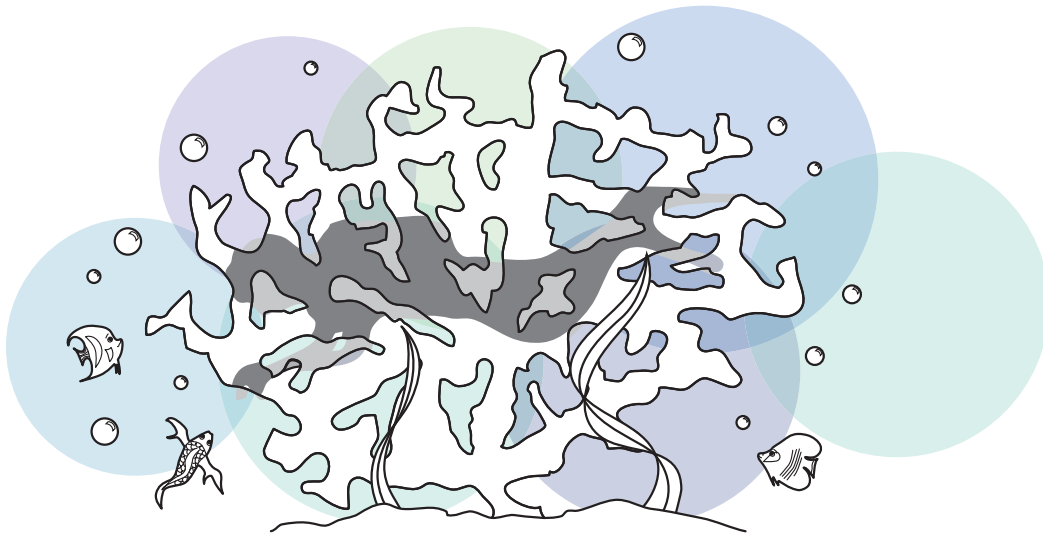
“Thank you, Gracie,” said Gus.

“So my name is Gracie!” smiled Little Fish. “Is it because I am graceful when I swim? Or is it because I helped someone?”

“Child,” said Old Codfish, “You were named and loved by God before you did any of those things. Gracie, you are a gift to all of us, and especially to Gus today, because of who you are, not what you do. You are a child of God.”

All the fish in the neighborhood surrounded Gracie and sang a fish hymn of praise to God. Gracie smiled at her new neighbor, Gus, and wondered what new adventures were in store for them.





Gracie and the Two-Legged Fish

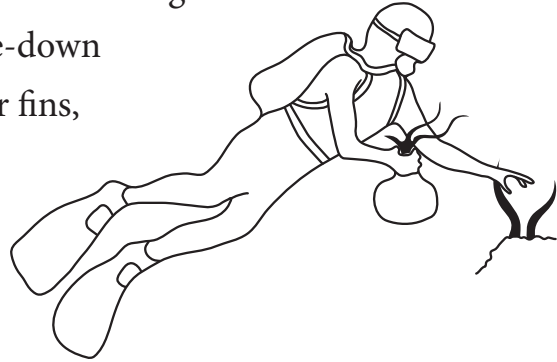
It was a day that Gracie would never forget, the day she first met the strange, large, two-legged fish. It began like most days on the coral reef. When the morning light touched the coral where they had been sleeping, Gracie and her friends swam out, prayed a bubble prayer to God, and began searching for breakfast.

Later that morning, Gracie was looking for a stone for her favorite game, “Pass the Stone.” Suddenly, the sea seemed to grow dark. The coral turned from its usual hot pink to a dull dusty rose. Gracie looked up toward where the light had been and saw something unlike anything she had seen before.

It was as large as a shark, but with two large, skinny fins behind and two smaller fins on each side of its body. What looked like its head was very small except for the large, flat eye that seemed to cover its whole face. Tubes came out of its head and connected to a big yellow thing on its back. The body of the strange fish was sleek and black, without scales. It held something in its smaller side fins that it kept bringing up to its face.

Gracie heard a click before a bright light appeared. Then she could hardly see for a moment.

Gracie was so startled by the strange fish that she forgot to hide. She just stared and stared. The strange fish pulled something from its body that looked like an upside-down jellyfish. Reaching down with its shorter fins, the strange fish began picking up algae and putting it inside the thing that looked like a jellyfish.



“What if this strange fish decides it wants to collect little fish, too?” thought Gracie. “I better warn my friends.” She swam off as fast as she could and found the others behind the sponge bed. She described to them the strange fish she had seen. Gus Grouper said he had heard other fish talk about these strange creatures. He thought they were called “humans” and that their fins were not fins at all, but things called “legs” and “arms.” Gus told the other fish terrible stories of humans who had caught his cousins for food. He’d also heard they poured sticky liquid into the water that killed all the fish, coral, and algae. This last story reminded Gracie that the human she had seen was taking away some of their algae.

Gracie had never really liked the algae. It had caused Gus all kinds of problems last year, and too much of it could poison the water so that no fish would be able to live. On the other hand, she had learned in school that the algae held the coral reef together. It also produced the oxygen that they all needed to breathe. Suddenly, the algae seemed very important.

“Maybe we should hide the algae from the humans so that they can’t find it,” she said.

The others agreed that this sounded like a good idea. They began collecting all the algae they could find. They stuffed it into crevices. They asked the rays to cover it with their large, flat bodies. They tied it between the branches of the coral so it would be hard to remove. But Gracie began running out of ideas. “If only we could build a huge cave and post all the really scary fish with big teeth around it, then no human would dare to take our algae.” As if to start building the cave, Gracie swam down to the rocks and dislodged one with her tail. It had been on the sea bottom for a long time, and when she turned it over she couldn’t believe what she saw. It was almost as if something or someone had scratched a picture of her into the rock!

At that moment Old Codfish, who had been watching everything with an, amused look, cleared his throat. “Let me see what you found, Gracie,” he said.

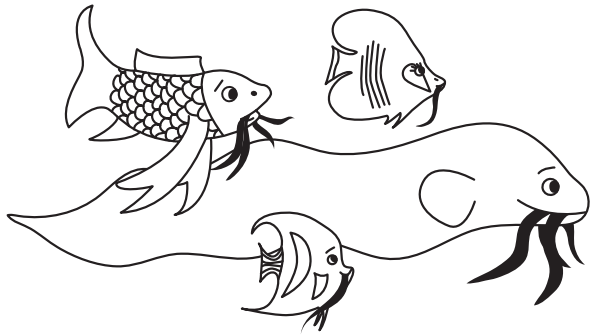
She brought over the stone with the fish scratched on it. “You have found something very important.” Gracie called the others and they swam over to Old Codfish to see the stone, too.

“This is a gift from the humans of many years ago,” began the old fish. “I have heard that a group of these humans used the sign of the fish as a way of saying that they believed in God and especially in God’s son, Jesus. These humans, called Christians, were being hunted and arrested by others. Some of them had very little food or other belongings, but they shared with each other all that they had.”

“They don’t sound so bad,” said Benji Butterflyfish.

“I think that if they remembered how God always provided for them in the past and still does today, perhaps they would learn how to share with others again,” mused the Old Codfish.

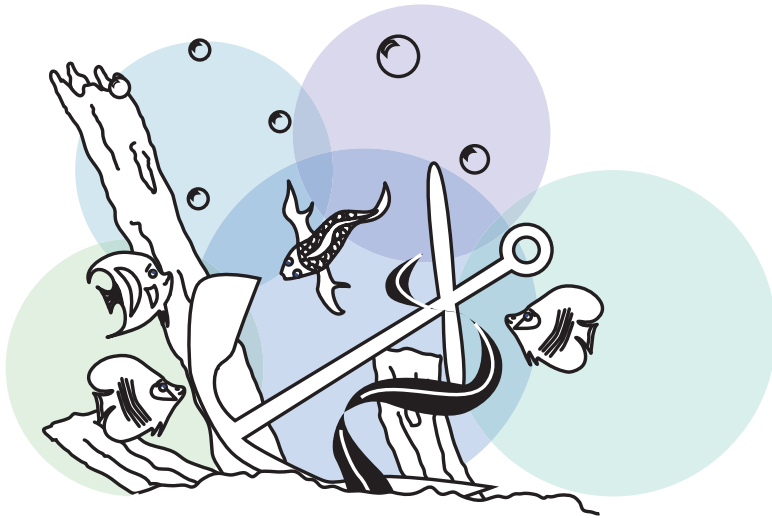
“Maybe if we showed them how to share the algae, they would remember,” said Gracie. She had been feeling guilty for hiding all the algae and wanting to build a big, scary cave. She began untying the plants from the coral and bringing back the algae from the crevices. The others helped her.



Working together they soon had the reef looking the way it had looked in the morning.

As the sun set and the water became darker, the little fish looked around their beautiful world.

They said an evening bubble prayer to God, thankful for the day of fun and sharing. Gracie swam back into her coral, ready to dream about the human she had met this day. She felt that sharing the reef’s algae would change her life. She hoped the human would discover how to share as well.



Gracie's Treasure

It was a beautiful day on the coral reef. The sun came streaming down through the water, creating pools of color as it met the many coral colonies and fishes. “Just the day for an adventure!” thought Gracie, as she looked around for her friends. She quickly found Benji and Belinda Butterflyfish and Angie Angelfish. Gracie began to tell them of her plan to go on an adventure to her favorite secret place.

Gracie led the way, and soon the four friends were swimming to a deeper part of the sea.

“Are we there yet?” asked Benji, impatiently.

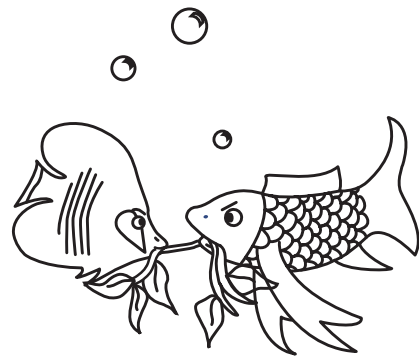
“Almost!” replied Gracie.

She looked ahead, seeking her secret place on the bottom of the sea. Finally, she saw what she was looking for. It had large wooden beams, a great rusty anchor, and many hidden spots to play in. “It’s a ship!” said Angie Angelfish

with wonder. They swam quickly under and over the beams of the ship, playing tag and hide-and-seek.

When they grew hungry, Gracie took them to her most secret treasure — a wonderful plant growing from ancient seeds that spilled on the bottom of the ocean when the ship went down. It was the best tasting thing that Gracie had ever eaten, and this was the first time that she had shared it with anyone. Angie thought it tasted sweet and sugary. Benji thought it was spicy. Belinda enjoyed licking the salt water from the plant and getting two tastes in one.

After they had eaten, Benji decided they should take the plant back with them to the reef. Gracie was willing to share with her friends, but she didn't want everyone to know about her secret treasure. Benji and Gracie continued to argue and even began tugging on the plant from opposite sides. Belinda and Angie both tried to get them to stop, but they wouldn't listen. Then they all heard a soft, familiar voice say, "Where is your treasure?"



Gracie and Benji were so surprised to see that their teacher, Old Codfish, had joined them that they both dropped the plant at the same time and spun off in two different directions. After they returned to the group, they found that Old Codfish was about to begin one of his wonderful stories, so they forgot about the plant for the moment and settled down to listen.

"This reminds me of a story that I heard as a young fish back when I lived in the Mediterranean Sea," began the wise teacher. "This was about another ship and happened long ago when the Christians were just beginning."

Gracie remembered that last year Old Codfish had told her about the early Christians when she had found the stone with a fish on it. She was anxious to know more about these people who knew how to share and followed Jesus.

“This story is about a Christian named Paul who was taken on a ship as a prisoner. He had a treasure, too, but it may be different from yours. There was a storm on the sea, and the waves were getting higher and higher. The crew were afraid and began throwing overboard everything they didn’t need.”

“Did they throw out Paul’s treasure?” asked Belinda, horrified.

“No, Paul’s treasure was not part of the cargo,” replied Old Codfish. “The storm grew worse and the crew grew more afraid, so they threw over the side all the parts of the ship for loading and unloading cargo.”

“That wasn’t Paul’s treasure, was it?” interrupted Benji.

“No, Paul’s treasure was not part of the ship. Then Paul called the crew together and told them that God would protect them as long as they stayed together. Some of the men didn’t listen to him and started to get in the lifeboat because they thought they would be safer. Paul asked the captain to stop them from making this mistake. So the crew set the lifeboat adrift before the other men could reach it.”

“I guess the lifeboat wasn’t Paul’s treasure,” said Angie with a laugh.

“You’re right,” continued Old Codfish. “Paul gathered the crew together and told them that they should eat and prepare themselves to watch God save them. They sat down to a good meal and then threw the remaining food over the side of the ship.”

“So even the food was not their treasure!” said Gracie with amazement.

“No, by now they knew that they had to depend on God and each other for their very lives. Ahead they saw an island, and the ship ran aground on a reef, much as your secret ship, Gracie, but every person on board made it to the shore. So where was Paul’s treasure?” asked Old Codfish.

The others looked at each other, puzzled.

“Well,” said Benji, “we know it wasn’t the cargo, the ship, the lifeboat, or the food. What else is there?”

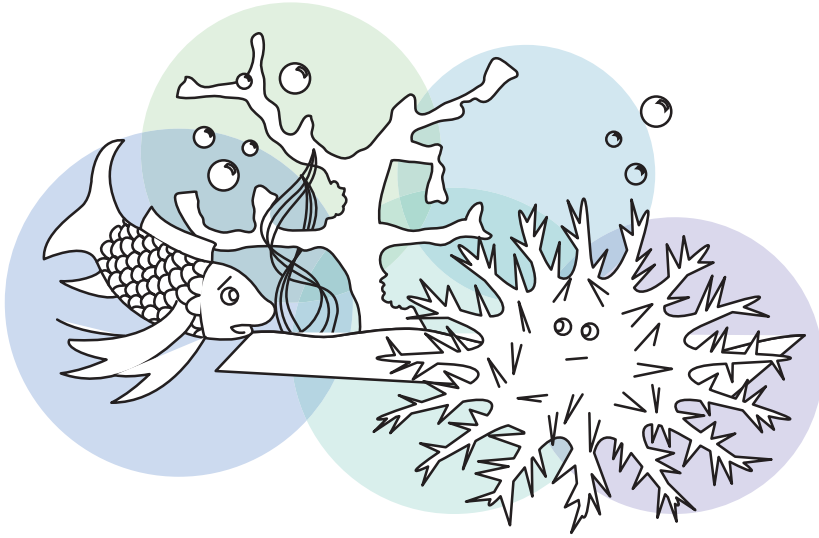
“There were the people,” began Gracie. “They all survived because they worked together and they believed God’s promise to save them.”

“Yes,” replied Old Codfish, “their treasure was their lives and their trust in the God who loves them.”

“I feel pretty silly arguing over a plant now, no matter how good it tastes,” said Gracie.



“I wonder where your real treasure is, Gracie,” said Old Codfish with a smile. Gracie thought about this all the way back to the reef. Perhaps she is still thinking about it today.



Gracie and the Sea Star

“One, two, three ...” Gracie heard Gus Grouper calling out the numbers in the distance as she swam with all of her might. This time she was going to hide someplace that her friend would never find her. She was going to become the hide-and-seek champion of the coral reef. She swam quickly between the pink and orange coral branches as she looked for the perfect hiding place. Her friend Angie Angelfish could identify every plant that might hide her tiny fish body. And yet, Gracie thought, “I can be brave. I can hide someplace where we have never been before.” So Gracie swam to the very edge of the reef near the deep waters.

Suddenly she stopped. The coral here did not look like the coral in her home. It was all white, hard, and still. Perhaps it was no longer alive. “But what had killed it?” she wondered.

Then far below she saw a shape that looked like both a star and a giant pin cushion. She swam down to this strange creature and said boldly, “Excuse me! Can you tell me who has killed the coral?”

The spiny, star-shaped creature slowly lifted one of his twelve large spiny arms and asked, “Are you talking about my dinner last night? I was really hungry, so I ate a few more coral creatures than I usually do.”

“You ate the coral!” cried Gracie. “But the coral is our home. All of us who live here depend on the coral.”

“I had no idea that anyone else thought the coral was important,” replied the sea star. “My mother always told me that to stay big and strong I needed to eat a lot.”

“But there must be other things you could eat,” Gracie suggested. “Have you ever tried algae? Many of us love to eat plants.”

“I suppose I could try eating plants,” began the sea star. “Maybe the other sea creatures would like me better. I don’t have many friends.”

“My name is Gracie,” said the little fish. “I will be your friend.”

“My name is Seymour,” replied the sea star. “I will try to eat algae and then maybe I can find some other friends, too.”

“Wait a minute, Seymour. I will find you some friends,” said Gracie, and she swam off to find the other fish.

“98, 99, 100,” counted Gus. “Gracie, you were supposed to hide,” he complained when he saw her swimming his way.

“I found a new friend. He’s very lonely,” she assured Gus.

“All right! Let’s round up Angie and meet your new friend,” Gus said, going back the way Gracie had come. He quickly found Angie Angelfish, and the three of them headed to the edge of the reef, where Gracie saw a spiny, star-shaped creature down below.

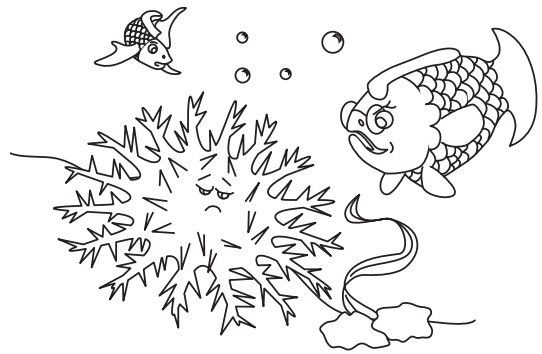
“Seymour, stop!” she cried suddenly. “You’re eating the coral again!”

The sea star slowly lifted his spiny arm and said, “I’m not Seymour. I’m his twin brother, Simon. Who are you?”

Gracie looked puzzled and then noticed that one of this sea star’s arms was shorter than the other eleven — just like Seymour’s had been. “Seymour, stop playing around, I know it’s you,” she said. “Now stop eating the coral. There’s some nice algae over there.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” replied the sea star. “I’m Simon, not Seymour, and I don’t know anything about eating plants instead of coral.”

At this moment they heard a slight cough just behind Gus. They turned and saw Old Codfish, who looked very serious as he approached the group. “Seymour Crown-of-Thorns Sea Star,” began Old Codfish, who never used anyone’s full name unless he was really angry. “You do know Gracie, and you are not telling the truth.”



“I’m sorry, Gracie,” replied Seymour. “I was embarrassed that I was so hungry that I did just what I always do — eat the closest thing around. The algae was way over there, and this coral looked so good.”

“Seymour,” said Old Codfish, sounding more kindly now. “You may have just made up the name of Simon, but what you did reminds me of another Simon — a human, Simon Peter, who also said he didn’t know his friend. That friend was Jesus.”

A hush fell over the sea as Old Codfish began to tell the story of Jesus, who wore a crown of thorns, and about his friend Simon Peter, who was afraid of getting in trouble and so pretended that he did not know Jesus.

“Did Jesus ever forgive him?” asked Seymour, hopefully.

“Yes,” replied Old Codfish. “He asked him, ‘Do you love me?’ and Simon Peter said, ‘Lord, you know that I love you.’ Then Jesus said, ‘Feed my sheep!’”

“Feed my sheep!” exclaimed Gus. “Did Jesus have sheep?”

“No,” replied Old Codfish. “But he wanted Simon Peter to think of others and not just himself. That is something like what you asked Seymour to do, isn’t it, Gracie?”

“I guess so. I wanted him to know that this coral is our home and we all need to take care of it,” said Gracie.

“I can help Seymour by growing some really tasty plants,” said Angie.

“I can build new homes for some of the creatures who lived in this coral by using the rocks down there,” said Gus.

“I guess I could talk to other sea stars about trying new foods,” said Seymour, reluctantly.

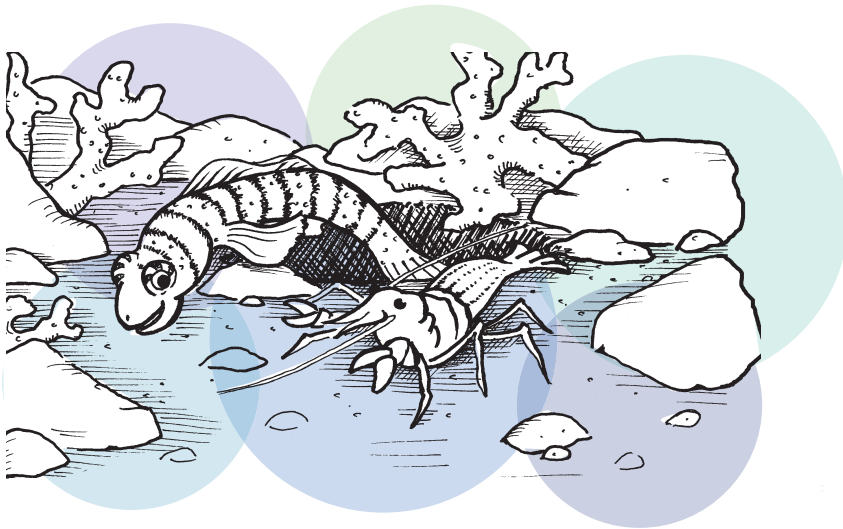
“What can I do, Old Codfish?” asked Gracie. “I’m such a little fish.”

“You can keep telling the truth just as you did to Seymour,” replied Old Codfish.

“You have helped to save the coral reef just by speaking up.”

The group of friends, old and new, said a bubble prayer to God of the seas, and each headed off to help others as Jesus taught.





Gracie Finds Joy

It was the big day! Gracie's school was going on a field trip with all her friends. Gracie was up extra early and swam to her favorite fish cleaning salon on the reef, Cara's Cleaners. There was already a line, but Gracie waited patiently for her turn.

Just as she reached the front of the line, Benji Butterflyfish came rushing over and blurted out to Gracie, "You're such a little fish, and it'll hold up the field trip if I wait in this long line. You don't mind letting me go first with Cara the cleaner fish, do you?"

Gracie bit her bottom fishy lip and said very quietly, "No, you go first."

Benji replied, "Thanks, Gracie. You know the God of the seas loves a cheerful giver."

Gracie thought, "Here I waited all this time and Benji just swims right up and asks me to give up my space. What if I don't feel like it? Does that mean that God doesn't love me?"

Just behind her, Old Codfish gave a little cough. “I would imagine that you don’t feel very cheerful right now, Gracie.

Am I right?”

Gracie thought that Old Codfish, her teacher, was the smartest fish she knew. Sometimes he seemed to know exactly what she was thinking and feeling, like now. Gracie nodded her head slowly and then took her turn with Cara the cleaner fish.

Somehow, the excitement that she had felt at the beginning of the day was just not there anymore.

Old Codfish rounded up the class and said, “It’s time for our field trip. Today we’re going to explore our reef for what it means to be a cheerful giver. Does anyone have any thoughts before we head out?”

Belinda, Benji’s sister, raised her fin and said, “We should always have a smile on our face whenever we give something to someone else.”

“What if we don’t feel like smiling?” retorted Gracie, still upset over Benji’s behavior.

“Perhaps there is something deeper going on than being happy here,” said Old Codfish. “I wonder if trying to find joy in giving would be a better theme for our field trip.”

“Is Joy a jellyfish?” said Gus Grouper.

“Joy can be someone’s name, but that’s not the kind of joy I’m thinking of today, Gus,” said Old Codfish. “Let’s see if we can find this other kind of joy as we travel.”

All the fish paired off and began to swim in a line, following Old Codfish. Gracie and Angie Angelfish chose to be partners, and Gracie tried to stay as far away from Benji as she could.

After a few minutes of swimming in and out of the coral, the school of fish halted by a pink, flowery-looking object attached to the reef.

“Don’t get too close!” warned Old Codfish. “This sea anemone stings. I want you to meet a friend of mine.”

“You have a friend that is a plant?” interrupted Benji.

“Plants are my friends in a way,” replied Old Codfish, patiently, “but you haven’t actually seen the friend I want to introduce yet.

Ilo, are you in there?”

When he called, a small clownfish stuck his nose out of the sea anemone’s tentacles. “Hello, Old Codfish, my friend. This must be your school of young students. How can I help you on your field trip?”

“We’re looking for joy,” said Gracie. “Can you tell us what it means?”

Ilo paused, then he said, “I think joy is feeling safe and protected. I feel joyful when I think about my sea anemone and how she shares her home with me.”

“But aren’t you afraid of getting stung?” asked Angie Angelfish, who knew all sorts of things about plants.

“No, she protects me and I protect her from butterflyfish,” Ilo said, giving a special, knowing look to Benji. “We bring joy to each other.”

“Thank you, Ilo,” said Old Codfish. “We need to move on to our next stop. You have helped us along our way to finding joy.”

The class paired up again and continued swimming. This time they dove deeply to the sandy floor and surrounded a small hole.

“Meet two more friends, Gioia Gobyfish and Alegría Blindshrimp,” indicated Old Codfish, pointing to the hole.

Out came a tiny, transparent shrimp and a larger narrow fish, who kept her tail in the hole.

“Hello, class,” said Gioia, the goby fish. “Welcome to our home!”

“You both live in that tiny hole!” said Gracie in wonderment.

“How can you find joy being so crowded together?”

“Well, I wouldn’t be able to build a home on my own. I don’t have strong pinchers like my friend here,” replied Gioia.

“And I wouldn’t be able to see anything that might want to eat me while I work,” said Alegría. “When Gioia sees something, she moves her tail and I run into the hole. So we find joy in looking out for each other.”

“Wow,” thought Gracie, “neither of these two could live on their own, but together they could be joyful even in a small space.”

Old Codfish thanked these friends before forming up the lines for one last stop on the field trip. They had to swim a long way to the very shoreline of the Red Sea. As they arrived, they saw big, wooden tree roots and all sorts of living creatures even smaller and younger than anyone in their class.



“Does anyone know where we are?” asked Old Codfish.

“We’re in the fish nursery,” said Belinda Butterflyfish. She and Benji had just welcomed a new brother into their family.

Old Codfish turned to one of the nearby nursery workers, Freude Fincastle, and asked him to explain his work.

Freude explained how the mangrove tree roots protect the eggs and the young fish until they are old enough to join their families on the reef.

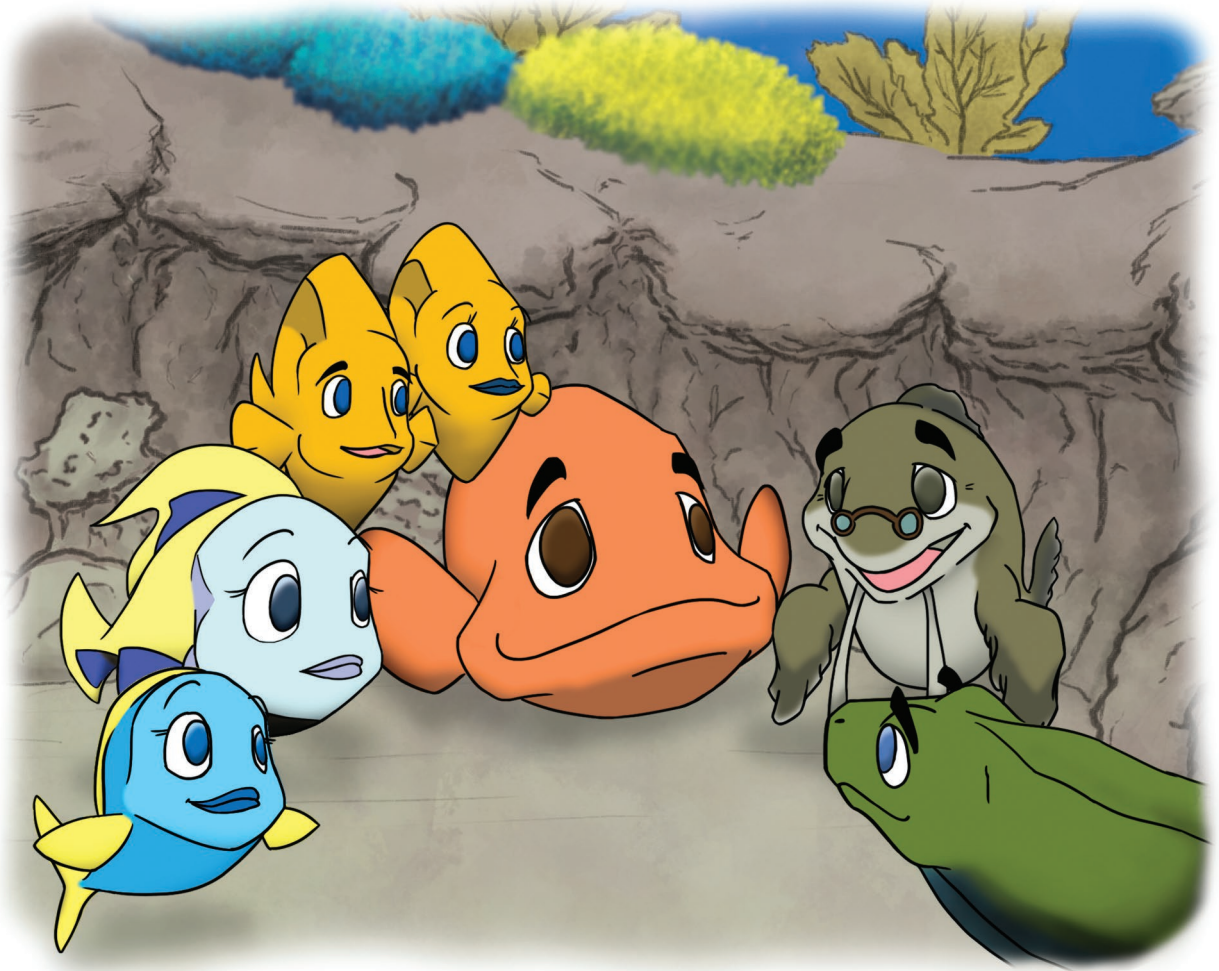
Gracie asked, “Where do you find joy?”

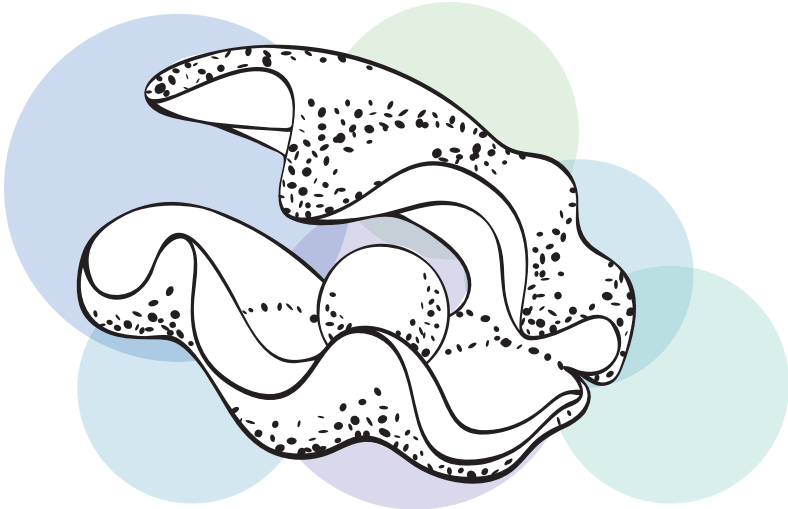
Freude said, “I find joy in watching the young grow and get stronger. Sometimes we have bad days here in the nursery, but I only have to look at one of these young fish to know that what I share is important.”

Old Codfish turned to the class and asked if they had found joy today on their field trip.

They all cried, “Yes!”

“So when we give to someone else like Cara, Ilo, Gioia, Alegría, Freude, and our plant friends did, we bring joy to God, to others, and even to ourselves,” taught Old Codfish. “I wonder where you will find your joy in giving.”





Gracie and the Great Pearl

“One more shell,” thought Gracie as she worked on the box in front of her. “I just need one more shell and I will be able to start my collection of beautiful things.” Gracie was grateful that Angie Angelfish had made her some gooey plant glue so that she would be able to attach the shells easily. She had found the old wooden box in the sunken ship where her favorite plant grew and had begun to decorate it with shells she found among the coral of the Red Sea, where she lived. Gracie swam around in ever-widening circles until she found what she was looking for, a small, beautiful abalone shell wedged under a rock below her.

Gracie tried to tug on the shell, but it would not move. She nudged it and splashed it and wiggled it, but still it would not move.

“Do you need some help, Gracie?”

Gracie whirled around to see her big friend Gus the Grouper right behind her. Ordinarily a little fish like Gracie would be afraid of a big fish like a

grouper, but Gus was different. Gracie and her friends had gotten Gus out of a tight spot, and they had been friends ever since.

Gracie said, “Oh, Gus, I could use your help. Could you get me this beautiful abalone shell for my box?”

“I think so,” replied Gus, and he flicked his tail so hard that the resulting wave caused the little shell to break away from the rock, landing just in front of Gracie.

“Oh, thank you, Gus, “ said Gracie. She brought the shell over to her box and applied some plant glue so the shell stuck to the last open space on her box.



“What are you making, Gracie?” said Gus, in his slow, deep voice.

Gracie hadn’t realized that Gus had followed her back to the ship, and she wasn’t sure she wanted him to go with her on her search.

“I’m making a box to hold beautiful things that I find,” said Gracie.

“Oooh! Can I go with you on your treasure hunt, Gracie? Please?” asked Gus.

“All right, Gus, as long as what we find goes into my box,” said Gracie. She wanted to collect these beautiful things to decorate her fan coral home. She didn’t want others to take the most beautiful ones for themselves.

The two friends began to swim around the sunken ship. Gracie spotted a shiny button. Gus found a tiny mirror. They continued to swim in and out

of ancient portholes until Gracie saw another shell attached to the old ship's deck. Unlike the abalone, this shell did not have beautiful colors. It was bumpy and brownish and looked very old, but perhaps the creature inside would know where to find other beautiful things.

Gracie bubbled a greeting to the shell and asked her name.

After some time, the shell replied with an ancient voice. "I am Grandmother Oyster. It is many years since any fish has asked my name. Why have you disturbed my rest, little fish?"

Gracie addressed the shell with great respect. "Oh, Grandmother Oyster, my friend Gus and I are sorry if we disturbed you, but we are looking for beautiful things. You must have seen many beautiful things as you rested in this place."

"Yes, I have, child," said Grandmother Oyster more kindly. "There are many beautiful things in the sea. We are indeed blessed. Would you like to see the beautiful thing I have made?"

"Yes, please!" said Gracie and Gus together.

Grandmother Oyster opened her shell further and displayed a large, shiny, white pearl nestled in her body. "It has taken many years for me to make this pearl, layer upon layer. What do you think of my pearl?"

"It is the most beautiful thing I have ever seen," replied Gracie, and she meant it. It was large and perfectly round, smooth and sparkly.

“You probably would like to have it for your collection, but are you willing to pay the price?” said Grandmother Oyster, looking at Gracie closely.

“The price?” asked Gracie. “I will give you my box and all the beautiful things we have collected.”

“What would I do with a box of treasures?” replied the shell. “But if you gave all of those beautiful things to all the creatures who truly need beauty and joy in their lives here in the sea, perhaps we could share this pearl.”

Gus and Gracie looked at each other, then began to swim all over the reef, giving each fish or creature they saw something from the box of beautiful things. The coral reef had never looked lovelier.

They swam back to Grandmother Oyster, and she smiled. She displayed the Great Pearl, and all the creatures of the sea joined in a song of thanksgiving to the God of the Sea who had made them all beautiful, each in their own way.



Gracie and the Big Storm

In looking back, Gracie thought that she should have seen that a storm was coming.

When she woke up that morning the colors on the coral reef in her Red Sea home looked a little darker. The water even felt heavier, as if a giant were pressing down on the surface of the sea.

When she looked at the other sea creatures, most did not seem to pay attention to any of these things. She did notice that the sharks were all swimming to deeper water, but you never could tell with sharks. They might take off at a moments notice.

So Gracie decided to ignore those feelings that something was not quite right and swam off in search of her friends.

She found Angie Angelfish tending one of her special algae plants that grew well in warm water.

“What’s new, Angie?” asked Gracie.

“Not much, Gracie,” replied Angie.

“Ephraim Eel has a new home in that hole under the next reef. He likes it there, because it is darker and more protected. Maybe we should bring him a housewarming gift.”

“That’s a great idea, Angie. What does an eel need in his hole?” thought Gracie aloud.

“Maybe you could take him one of the shells from your collection to make his home more beautiful,” replied Angie. “I think I’ll bring one of my algae seedlings, so that he will have good food.”

So they headed to Ephraim Eel’s new hold, each bring her housewarming gift. When they arrived, they saw they were not alone, as many of their friends had gathered to wish Ephraim well.

Benji and Belinda Butterflyfish were there, as were Gus Grouper and even Old Codfish, who was about to offer a blessing for Ephraim’s new home.

Bless this home, O God of the Sea,” prayed Old Codfish. “May it be a place where friends gather, songs are sung, food is shared, and you, O God, are remembered.”

All the other fish bubbled their agreement with this blessing. Ephraim was happy to have all his friends surrounding him.

As they were sharing the feast of many different types of algae that Ephraim had prepared, they noticed the sea had gotten much darker and that the water was moving so rapidly that some of the smaller fish had to grab onto the algae and coral to not be carried away in the current.

“There must be a storm brewing,” said Old Codfish. “I can’t remember the last time we had a big storm, but we must make preparations. Everyone should take cover and go someplace safe.”

Some fish began swimming into caves or under large pieces of coral. Gracie thought that she would like to go back to her fan coral home, but was that safe? Most of her friends had already left, but here she was still trying to make up her mind where a safe place might be.

“Hurry, Gracie,” Old Codfish encouraged as he swam toward the bottom of the sea.

“I know!” said Gracie. When she had gone on her field trip to the fish nursery a while back, she had been told that the nursery was in the mangrove tree roots because this was the safest place to be when a storm hit.

Gracie swam as quickly as her little fins would take her to the nearest mangrove tree and huddled with the infant sea creatures, who were experiencing their first storm and were very frightened.

“Don’t be afraid,” said Gracie, even though she was a little afraid herself. “God will watch over us.”

This seemed to reassure the young fish, and they waited as the waves and

thunder continued to roar around them. After a while the storm began to calm down, and Gracie thought about return to the reef.

She went first to her home and discovered one of the fans in her coral had broken off in the storm.

She swam by Angie's plants and saw that many were uprooted and were leaving the reef to wherever the currents took them.

She swam quickly to Ephraim's new home and saw that his beautiful hole had collapsed.

Gracie began to panic and bubbled all her friends' names at one. "Angie, Benji, Belinda, Gus, Ephraim, Old Codfish." There seemed to be only silence. Where could they be?

Then she heard a noise behind her, and with relief she saw that all her friends were beginning to emerge from their safe hiding places.

"Our home looks so different," said Belinda.

"Where are we going to live?" asked Ephraim, who was looking sadly at his new home and the remains of the feast.

"What are we going to eat?" asked Benji, who was always a little concerned about food.

"Maybe we'll all have to move someplace else that didn't have a storm," said Angie, who was watching another of her beloved plants float away.

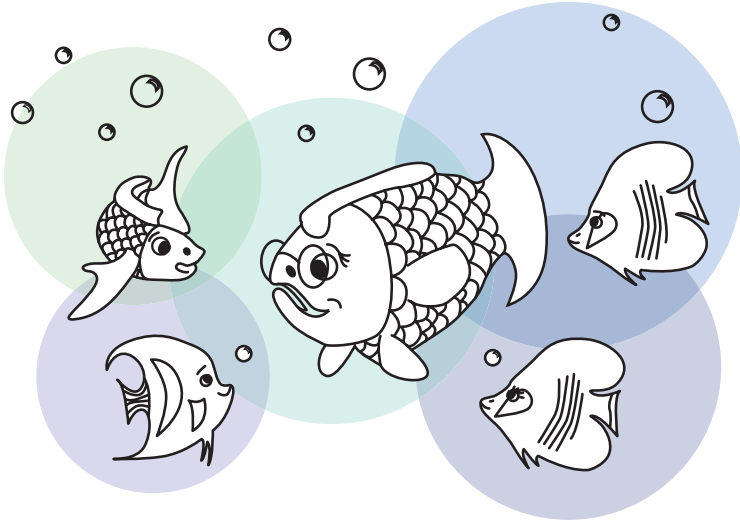
“But you blessed this place, Old Codfish,” said Gracie. “Did God hear you? Did we do something wrong?”

“My little friend,” began Old Codfish, “God does not punish us by sending storms. God is not angry. We are still blessed. It may just take all of us working together to make this place our home again.”

So all the sea creatures large and small began to help each other cleanup their homes and dig new holes for creatures like Ephriam who had no place to live. Some tended to the algae plants remaining and collected new seedlings.

As they worked, they sang a bubble song of praise to God and realized that Old Codfish’s blessing had happened. They were friends gathered, singing songs, and sharing food, just not in the way they had imagined.





Gracie Becomes a Neighbor

Gracie and all of her friends were excited. Old Codfish had summoned them for a special announcement.

“What do you think it could be?” asked Gracie.

“Perhaps he has found a new type of algae for us to eat,” suggested Angie Angelfish, who was always thinking of her plants.

“Maybe he has found some pirate treasure,” offered Benji Butterflyfish, who was looking for adventure.

“I think he has composed a new song for our next celebration,” replied Belinda, Benji’s sister. She was the musical one in the family.

“What time is it now?” asked Gus Grouper. He didn’t have a suggestion to offer, but was eager to hear Old Codfish.

“The shadows on the coral reef look about right,” said Ephraim Eel. “It must

be time to head to the sunken ship.” This was the place where they were to meet Old Codfish.

All of the friends swam together to the sunken ship. There, waiting for them, was Old Codfish, with a worried expression on his face. “Thank you for coming, my young friends,” began the elderly fish. “I have heard some troubling reports from the north. A school of mullets has just settled in our Red Sea.

“Are they dangerous?” interrupted Benji, still hoping for an adventure.

“No, they are not,” continued Old Codfish. “They have traveled far from a sea to the north. They were able to bring little with them and they don’t know anyone else in this sea. I would like you to be neighbors to them.”

“How exciting!” gasped Gracie. “I know just what neighbors do.” At an ever-increasing pace, Gracie began to shout orders to all of her friends. “Angie, you get some of your algae seedlings. Ephraim and Gus, they will need some rocks for building materials. Benji and Belinda, why don’t you bring some of the shells from this part of the sea to decorate their new homes? I’ll round up some other friends to help with this project.”

In the midst of all this activity, Old Codfish kept trying to get everyone’s attention again, starting sentences like: “Don’t you think...,” “Shouldn’t we listen...,” and “Maybe we should...,” but everyone was too busy to hear.

All the younger fish grabbed their assigned materials and headed north to find the school of mullets. Old Codfish followed along behind more slowly, sighing and shaking his head from side to side as he swam.

When Gracie and her friends reached the place where the school of mullets had settled, they greeted the mullets with a quick, bubbled, “Hi.” Then Gracie spoke on behalf of the group.

“Hello, travelers! We’ve come to be your neighbors. We have food to plant and rocks for building things and shells for decorating them. There are lots of us to help. We realize that you have just arrived, so we will do these things for you, because we’ve been planting, building, and decorating the Red Sea much longer than you have been here. Just tell us where you would like to make your home and we’ll get started.”

One of the mullets swam up to Gracie and spoke. “My name is Liza. You are right to call us travelers, because we have come a long way. We are glad to have new neighbors and we would like to tell you about our journey.”

“I’m sure we’d love to hear about it, Liza, but we’re here to work first, so just tell us where you’d like us to put these plants and rocks and things and we’ll get started. That’s what it means to be a neighbor,” replied Gracie.

“Thank you,” said Liza half-heartedly. “But wouldn’t you like to rest a little first so that we can tell you our story?”

“These fish don’t seem to want our help,” said Benji under his breath. “These shells are very heavy. I think I’m just going to put them down here, whether they like it or not.”

Angie was a little concerned that she had other plants to tend back home on the reef. She was ready to just leave her plants as Benji had left the shells and head for home to do her work.

Ephraim thought that perhaps the mullets didn't understand that they were offering to help without expecting to be paid. Maybe they did things differently in the far northern sea.

Gracie was sad. Her plan to be a good neighbor did not seem to be working. Now she felt very awkward and didn't know what to do.

It was at this moment that Old Codfish caught up with the group. He looked around at the silent fishes and asked what was going on.

Gracie began to explain how she wanted to be a good neighbor and they had brought all these things to the mullets. She didn't think the mullets wanted the things, and now she didn't know what to do.

"Did you ask them what they needed or wanted?" asked Old Codfish.

"Well, no," replied Gracie. "We just brought what we thought they would like and what was important to us."

"Don't you think maybe you should ask them?" nudged Old Codfish.

"I suppose," said Gracie. "Liza, how can we be neighbors to you?"

"But that is what I have been telling you, Gracie," said Liza. "We'd like to tell you our story. And we could use your help."

Liza and the mullets were now in charge. They asked those carrying rocks to build a stage. They used Angie's plant seedlings and the shells to decorate the set. Each of the mullets had a role to play in retelling their story. Any time another sea creature was needed, one of Gracie's friends took the role.

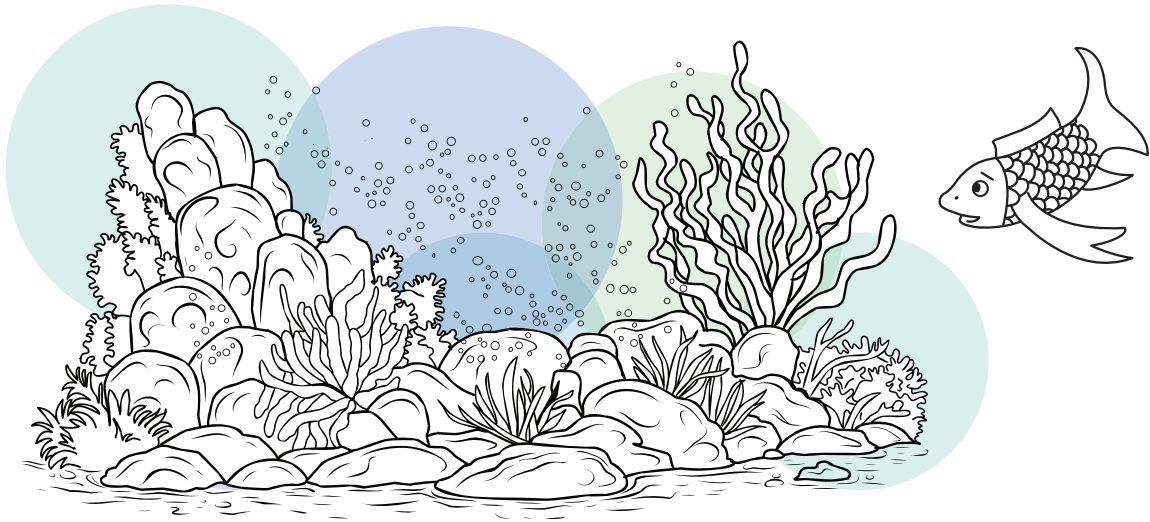
It was an amazing play, complete with sharks, fishing boats, dangerous currents, and poisonous pollutants. Gracie and her friends were enthralled by the story. They were amazed that anyone could have traveled through all these dangers and made it to their Red Sea. There was even enough adventure for Benji.

The story ended with them meeting their new neighbors. All the fish bubbled a prayer of gratitude to God of the Seas for bringing them together and they sang a hymn of being one community in God's big ocean.

Gracie pulled Old Codfish aside and said, "I thought I knew what it meant to be a good neighbor, but I was wrong. I really hoped I could help."

Old Codfish replied, "As God of the Seas says, 'Hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts.' Your heart was in the right place, Gracie. You wanted to help. Sometimes, however, we need to listen rather than act. Let those who have less than you tell you what they need, and let them be the ones to lead."

At this point, Liza Mullet swam up and asked Gracie to show her how to plant some of Angie's seedlings. The two fish swam off chattering about plants, shells, and their plans for telling the mullets' story of their dangerous travels to others in the sea. Perhaps they could find some more neighbors together.



Gracie and the Food Desert

Today is Mystery Field Trip Day! This was Gracie's first thought when she woke up. Old Codfish had promised them an outing because they had completed all their assignments. Like all her classmates, Gracie wanted to know where they were going, but Old Codfish was firm in keeping the location of this trip a secret. Gracie began to daydream about where they might go. Perhaps they might visit the fish nursery to see the little ones hatch and grow. Perhaps they might discover another sunken ship. Perhaps they might meet some new friends as they had on previous adventures. There were so many possibilities. Gracie was just sure it would be exciting.

Gracie's best friend, Angie Angelfish, appeared on the scene and had her own ideas about the nature of this mystery trip. Angie shared these with Gracie non-stop until they reached the school. It seemed that their friends were eager to go on this mystery trip as well, because everyone had arrived especially early today. They were there even before their teacher. As all the fish and other sea creatures continued to bubble greetings to each other and exchange guesses about the nature of the trip, the noise on the coral reef got louder and louder.

“Ahem,” said a small but steady voice. Old Codfish had arrived at last. The fish quieted down immediately and waited expectantly for what would happen next. Old Codfish cleared his throat again and then began speaking. “Welcome to Mystery Field Trip Day, students of the Red Sea Reef School! We will journey today to a part of the sea that is very different from our reef. Does everyone have a partner?”

The fish all paired up. Benji and Belinda Butterflyfish, twin brother and sister, were seldom found without the other. Gus Grouper and Efraim Eel paired up as best buddies who liked to hang out at the bottom of the reef. Of course, Angie and Gracie were partners. Soon they were all off.

As they swam in pairs, Gracie noticed yet again how beautiful her reef was, all the many colors of the corals, algae, and sponges. When the light made its way through the water, the colors seemed to change from dark to light and back to dark again as the waves moved the water in and out of the reef. Could any place be as lovely as her home? Perhaps they were going to someplace even more beautiful.

Once they left their own reef, Angie and Gracie talked all the way to their final destination, so Gracie stopped focusing on her surroundings. All of the sudden they stopped and she looked around. There were no longer any beautiful coral or any plants of any kind except for a few scraggly weeds around several boulders. The bottom of the sea looked very lumpy as if someone had squished it together and it was covered with dirt. The only other creatures she saw were a few scavenger fish near the scraggly weeds, eating whatever had drifted to this part of the sea. Gracie couldn't imagine why Old Codfish had brought them to this very ugly place.

As if he could read her mind, Old Codfish began to speak, “You probably are wondering why we came here on our mystery field trip. Believe it or not, this part of our sea was once a beautiful reef like the one where we all live.”

“What happened to it?” interrupted Benji, who was always anxious to find the answers to things.

“We are very near the shore here in this part of the sea,” continued Old Codfish. “People living on the land decided to farm the soil near the water, and the rain has washed all the dirt on top of this fringe reef. The dirt has killed the coral and plants in this part of the sea and all the animals have had to move to other reefs in search of food. What you’re looking at is a food desert.”

“Can’t we do something?” said Angie. She always liked to jump right in and fix problems when they happened.

“We can,” continued Old Codfish, “but it will take us all working together to change this desert into a reef again where others can eat and live.”

“Gus and I can sweep away this dirt from on top of the coral,” said Ephraim.

“I can bring in some new algae to plant next to the coral, so the fish will have something to eat,” said Angie.

Belinda and Benji decided to convince some sponges in a neighboring reef to relocate to this one. This would help strengthen the coral, once new creatures came to live on this reef.

Everyone seemed to leap immediately into various tasks transforming what had been so ugly into a place that was growing and changing. Other sea creatures came to watch the class at work and began to help as well.

Gracie was feeling very useless. She was too small to move dirt. She had never really learned to grow anything, despite having a best friend who was an amazing gardener. She hadn't ever made friends with sponges or some of the other helpful creepers and slow walkers that frequented the base of the reef. All she knew was her fan coral plant and what she had begun to learn in school. She really didn't think that anything she had to offer would be of use.

Old Codfish swam up to Gracie and began to talk. "Everyone is working so hard, but it will still be a food desert unless we can get the coral to return. I wonder how we might do that."

Coral is a colony of tiny animals with some plant-like characteristics, and Gracie remembered something from the many times she had discussed life with the tiny animals that made up her own fan coral home. It seems that after the full moon, some coral plants send eggs into the water to find their way to a new home. Wasn't the full moon just the other night? She remembered seeing the glow on the water. But, even if the eggs were released, how would they end up here on this food desert reef?

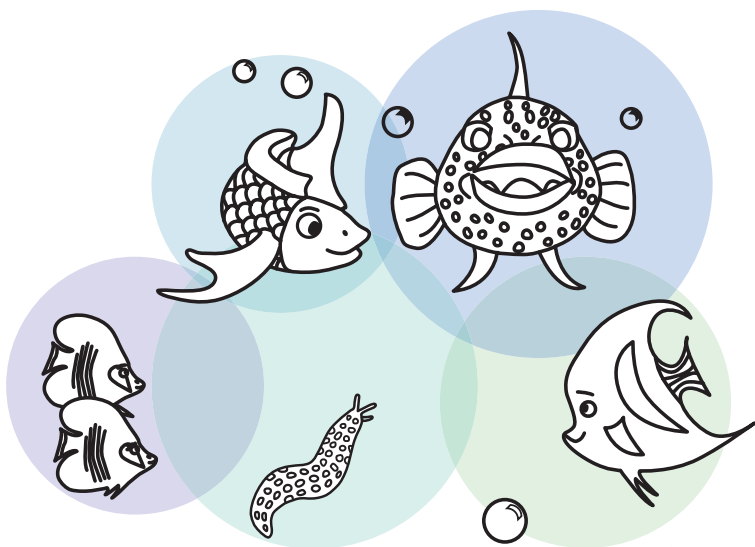
Gracie called all her friends together after they had finished their tasks. She explained her plan and they all swam with her to the neighboring reef and waited. Soon they began to see an awesome sight. Hundreds and hundreds of eggs were being released from the coral. Their small round pink bodies began floating up in the water. Gracie and her friends began to create a wave with their fins, herding the eggs toward the food desert reef, as if they were cattle

on the land. The friends kept up their furious fin flapping and other fish joined them when they saw what they were doing. The cloud of eggs gradually moved toward the reclaimed reef and when they were directly overhead the fish stopped flapping and the eggs settled down on top of the older coral.

Gracie and her friends cheered. They had come together as a beloved community and created something out of nothing. They knew that their work was not over, that they would need to come and tend their growing reef garden, but they had made a start by working together.

The group gathered around Old Codfish, who told them the story of how the son of the God of the Seas had fed 5000 people on a small amount of food. He said a prayer blessing their efforts, and gave thanks that this food desert was becoming a reef garden again.

As they journeyed back to their own beautiful reef, Gracie was grateful that she had been able to help as part of the community. Although it wasn't the field trip she had expected, it was a mystery that they had been able to feed so many by working together.



Gracie Meets a Sea Slug

One Spirit: Different Gifts

It was one of those days when Gracie was glad to be a fish. She and her friends, Angie Angelfish and Benji and Belinda Butterflyfish were about to have a race around the Red Sea coral reef where they all lived. Gus Grouper and Efraim Eel were also there, but they weren't going to be part of the race. Gus was too big and might get trapped in some of the small spaces where the route had been laid out, and Efraim was not as strong a swimmer as the other fish. Each would play his part, however. Gus would start the race, and Efraim would stretch himself out amongst the red-brown algae in front of his cave to be the finish line.

The time had come, and the race began. Gracie, Angie, Benji, and Belinda took off like a flash. They wove in and out of the branch coral, through the beds of rocks, around the dark hole where the octopus lived, and were headed for the finish line. Closer and closer they came. First Benji led, then Belinda. Angie was coming up from the rear, and Gracie was swimming in from the far side.

Efraim was ready for them. He was watching carefully so he could see who was going to win — it was going to be a close race. Then, right beside him, he heard it — the deepest, saddest sigh that he'd ever heard. It scared him so much that he swam back into his cave as quickly as he could, the race forgotten.

His friends hadn't heard the sigh at all and couldn't figure out why Efraim was no longer there. "Where are you, Efraim?" "Who won?" "Why did you swim away?" "Were you afraid we were going to land on top of you?" were some of the things they said.

Efraim slowly emerged from his cave and looked embarrassed. "I thought I heard something," he said sheepishly.

"But there isn't anyone around here," protested Benji, who was sure that he had won the race and was very disappointed.

"Actually there is," said a new voice below them. It seemed to be coming out of the red-brown algae. The fish were as startled as Efraim had been and were just as likely to swim into his cave.

"Down here," said the voice. "I know I'm not much to look at. I can't swim like any of you, and I don't have beautiful fins and tails. My name is Saul, and I am a sea slug." Here he sighed again. "But I would love to be a fish like all of you and have races and adventures."

"I'm sure there are many things you can do, too," said Gracie, trying to be friendly.

“All I do is eat and move very slowly,” said Saul.

“Well, you’re also good at hiding,” said Angie. “You’re the same color as the red-brown algae all around you. We didn’t even see you.”

“Yes,” said Belinda. “I bet if we were playing Hide n’ Seek instead of racing, you would win.”

“Perhaps,” sighed Saul, although he didn’t sound convinced.

“Wow, that is one funky-looking fish” said Benji, who hadn’t been paying much attention to the conversation, since the outcome of the race was not decided. He pointed his fin at a fish with 18 needlelike fins pointing in all directions.

“That’s a lionfish!” whispered Saul with fear in his voice. “He is very dangerous to little fish like all of you. Hide in Efraim’s cave and I’ll let you know when he’s gone.”

“Don’t you want to hide, too, Saul?” said Gracie out of concern.

“No, we need someone to watch to see when it is safe and, as Belinda said, I’m good at hiding,” indicated Saul.

So Gracie and all her friends huddled together in Efraim’s cave. It was cramped, and they had to stay as still as they could.

After a while, Saul shouted, “All clear!”

And the friends emerged and gathered around Saul.

“You saved us!” they said together. “Thank you.”

“See, your gift of hiding helped all of us!” cried Gracie.

“It reminds me of what Old Codfish always says that the God of the Seas wants us to do. Serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received.” (1 Peter 4:10)

“I still don’t think that hiding is much of a gift,” said Saul.

“Maybe that is just the beginning of your gifts, Saul,” interjected Angie. “If you turn red-brown because you eat red-brown algae, I wonder what would happen if you ate green or yellow algae. Maybe you have the gift of being able to change your appearance as well as hiding.”

“Well, I guess it doesn’t hurt to figure out why the God of the Seas made me the way I am,” said Saul. “Maybe together we can make new games where both fish and sea slugs can play.”

“I can’t wait to find out,” said Gracie. All of the friends agreed. They said a bubble prayer of thanksgiving for their escape from the lionfish and told stories and laughed into the night on their coral reef. “It’s good to make friends with different gifts, so we can help each other,” thought Gracie, as she made her way back to her fan coral. It had been a good day to be a fish and a good day to make a new friend who wasn’t.



Gracie and the Reef Mender

The storm clouds had gathered over the reef. Gracie and her friends were huddled in their safe places. They had been through storms before and knew what to do. This didn't keep them from being afraid as the reef got darker and the water choppier. There were flashes of light above them and a booming sound that sent chills down their spines to the tips of their fins.

Gracie prayed to the God of the Seas to protect them and keep them safe. She knew how destructive storms could be. Her friend Efraim Eel had lost his home in the last one and all her friends had helped to clean up the clutter.

All of sudden there was an especially loud crack. It sounded like it was in the reef near the sunken ship where she liked to play. She would need to wait until the storm was over before she could discover what had happened. As the winds began to still and the water became less choppy, Gracie ventured out of her fan coral and began to check on the others. She found her friend, Angie Angelfish first, who was already busy blowing the sand off of her algae plants.

“Everything all right, Angie?” asked Gracie.

“I’m fine,” replied Angie, “but this storm sure kicked up a lot of sand on my poor plants.” Angie was a gardener and spent her free time tending to the plants on the reef.

Benji and Belinda Butterflyfish were the next to appear. As brother and sister, they had holed up in their family’s branch coral home.

Slowly all her other friends began to appear. Gus Grouper, Efraim Eel, and Saul Slug all looked to be fine after the strong storm. Then Old Codfish, their teacher, appeared from the direction of the sunken ship.

“Is everyone well?” asked Old Codfish, who was out of breath from swimming so quickly.

“We’re fine, teacher,” chorused everyone.

“Good, good,” replied Old Codfish. “Then perhaps you could help the creatures who have lost their homes and all their food supply over by the shipwreck.”

The friends followed their teacher back in the direction from which he had come and were amazed to see a big hole in the reef near the surface of the water, where once many fish had made their homes.

“Lightning struck this part of the reef and destroyed this section,” explained Old Codfish, anticipating that they would want to know how this happened. “We need to help the animals that use to live in this part of the reef find a new home,” he continued.

“This was such a beautiful area,” sighed Gracie. “It looks so empty without this part of the reef.”

“Couldn’t we fix it?” asked Gus. He was always ready to help when called upon.

“I heard of a scientist who helped another reef to grow again, by introducing certain types of coral that grow well in warm water,” said Angie. “She used staghorn coral and attached it to the coral that was left, almost like grafting plants like my algae,” she continued. Angie was always interested in hearing any news that talked about growing things.

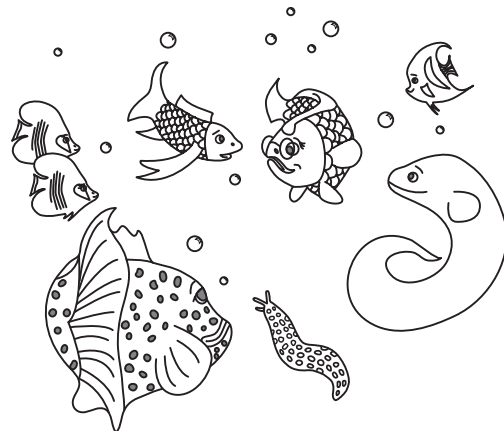
“I know where there is some staghorn coral over by my old home,” said Efraim. “Perhaps those coral colonies would be willing to move to this part of the reef in order to help out.”

“Aren’t you all forgetting something?” interjected Benji. “This scientist had arms and hands to be able to do this grafting. We can’t pick up this coral with our fins to mend this reef.”

“Surely we could find someone to help us,” said Gracie, not willing to give up this idea. “Who do we know who can pick things up?”

“Well it isn’t me,” said Saul, who had been very quiet. “Sea slugs don’t have any arms or fins, but I do have a friend who might be able to help. Her name is Octavia and she is very shy.”

“But does she have arms?” asked Benji.



“She has eight of them,” replied Saul.

“Eight arms?!” repeated Gracie. “But the only sea creature I know that has eight arms is an octopus,” she said, a little fearfully.

“That’s right!” replied Saul brightly. “She is so cool, but doesn’t know how cool she is. She has so much love to give that she has three hearts. And she is so smart that not only does she have a brain in her head, but each of her arms can think for itself.”

“Wow! That is cool!” said Benji, warming to the idea of meeting a real octopus.

Saul took them way down by the shipwreck to a dark hole that they hadn’t noticed before. He talked softly into the hole, explaining the situation. Finally, Octavia emerged and started to work.

Gracie and her friends were amazed how each arm could be doing a different task, carefully moving the staghorn coral, brushing away the sand, attaching the coral together with sea weed, and shaking the fins of the others as she was introduced. After they recovered from their surprise, the others began helping too, clearing up the clutter, talking to the coral colonies, and bubbling their prayers into the reef as it was being mended.

Old Codfish looked on, beaming with pride. His students were beginning to work together as a team, and they had made a new friend. After all the work was complete, he gathered them. Octavia was about to crawl back into her hole, but Old Codfish invited her to join the group and sit next to him in the place of honor. He told them of a great prophet, Isaiah, who had spoken in a difficult time like this to the people. “Your ancient ruins will be rebuilt; you

shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.” (Isaiah 58:12)

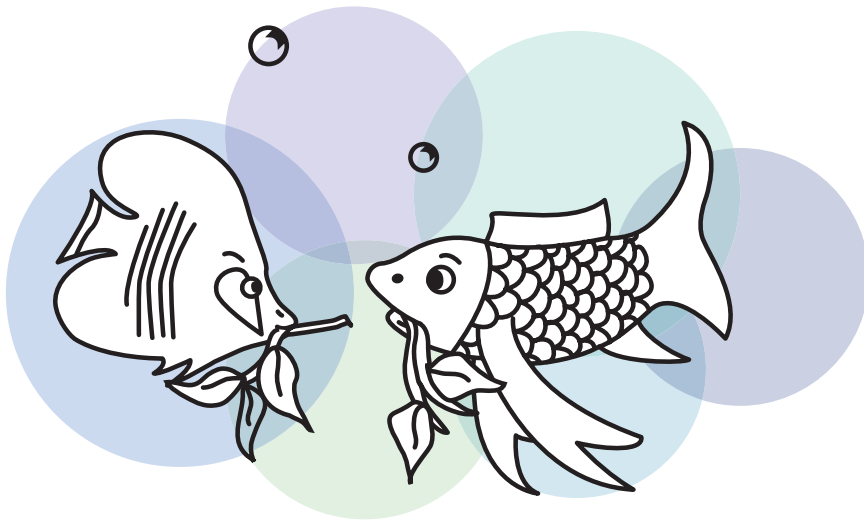
“Repairer of the breach,” said Gracie in a hushed voice. “That’s what we should call you, Octavia. We couldn’t have done this without you.”

“That’s too grand for me,” replied Octavia, blushing bright red.

“Well, then, we’ll just call you the Reef Mender,” insisted Gracie.

“I’d rather you just called me friend or neighbor,” replied Octavia shyly.

“Friend it is!” shouted everyone, and each one of Octavia’s eight arms hugged a different new friend. Then, they all sang praises to the God of the Seas and welcomed all who were to live in this new home that they had created together.



Gracie and Friends Use Their Gifts

It was an exciting day at the Red Sea School for Fish. Each student had been given the task of talking about something that they knew how to do very well. Already today, Gus Grouper had demonstrated how to dig holes in the sand in order to hide from others. Benji and Belinda Butterflyfish had done a joint report on twin behavior, even though they didn't always agree on who was the leader. Efraim Eel had discussed the ins and outs of cave home selection.

Gracie was getting more and more nervous, because she didn't really know what her gift was. She was just a little fish living in her fan coral, doing the best she could with the help of her friends. She'd better think of something quick, however, because only her friend, Angie Angelfish, was talking before she would be called on.

Everyone could guess what Angie would talk about — she was the plant expert. Sure enough, she began a long report on each form of algae on their reef and its particular need for care. One needed more sunshine; another

needed moving water rather than still water. One grew best near boulders, while another preferred sand.

As Angie continued, Benji became increasingly squirmy. Finally, he interrupted her description of the history of a particularly old plant form and said, “Angie, are you ever going to stop? You’re making me so hungry.”

Angie, in her particularly annoying know-it-all voice, said, “Benji Butterflyfish, you obviously don’t understand how important plants are for our reef. What if you had to grow all your own food? Would you even know where to begin? Knowing about plants is the most important gift of all!”

Gracie didn’t want to see her friends arguing, so she asked a question of their teacher, Old Codfish, that she hoped would change the subject slightly. “Are all plants good?” asked Gracie.

“What an interesting question, Gracie,” replied Old Codfish thoughtfully. “What do you think, Angie?” he asked.

“Oh, yes!” replied Angie. “They are all different, but they are all good.”

“I wouldn’t be so quick with your answer, Angie,” replied Old Codfish. “Sometimes you can get too much of a good thing. What happens when you get too much macroalgae on your reef?”

“What is macroalgae?” asked Gracie.

“Basically it means big plants,” replied Angie. She then went into a long explanation of the many positive uses of macroalgae both for the reef and for humans.

“Yes, all of this is good, but let’s take a break from our reporting and go look at some macroalgae that’s getting out of control,” suggested Old Codfish.

The fish all lined up with their field-trip partners, and off they went to an unfamiliar part of the reef that seemed very dark and creepy compared with where they’d just been.

“This part of the reef has been taken over by macroalgae. There are so many plants here that the reef is dying, because the plants are blocking the light that the coral and fish need to survive. What can you think of to help save this part of the reef?” asked Old Codfish.

Everyone turned to Angie. She blushed, realizing they expected her to use her gift of knowing plants to solve this problem. “Well, I could ... no, that won’t work. Or I could ... no, that won’t work either,” she murmured.

“For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them (Matthew 18:20),” muttered Old Codfish seemingly to himself.

As Angie continued to think about what she could do herself to fix the problem, Gracie began to get an idea. The more she thought about it, the more it made her smile. She thought she would have a little fun as she laid out her idea for the others to hear.

“So, Benji,” she said. “Are you still hungry?”

This seemed like an odd question in the midst of this difficult problem.

“I guess so,” said Benji. “But aren’t there more important problems now than my stomach growling?”

“Let Gracie finish, Benji,” replied his twin Belinda, beginning to catch on. “I think she might have an idea where we can eat and solve our problem at the same time.”

“Yes,” replied Gracie. “What if we all ate as much of this macroalgae as we possibly could? Would that solve the problem?”

“Why not invite everyone we know to come to this feast?” said Gus Grouper, expanding on the idea. “The groupers can also get rid of some of these roots by digging in the sand.”

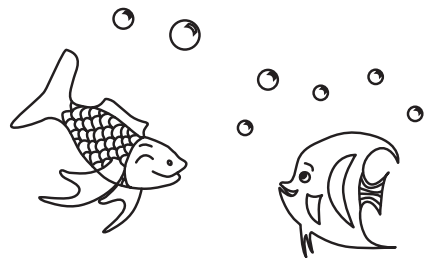
“We could invite all the twin fish,” said Belinda and Benji together. “That would double our numbers.”

“I’ll get my eel friends,” said Efraim. “We can get into some of these rocky crevices to get the algae away from the coral and other sea animals.”

All the other fish swam off to invite their friends and neighbors and anyone who happened to be swimming by to the great feast on the reef.

When they returned, they all began eating and eating and eating until the light once again broke onto the reef, and it began to look like home for the coral and the fish who wanted to live there.

After they had eaten all they could, they rested and gave thanks for the hard work of all.

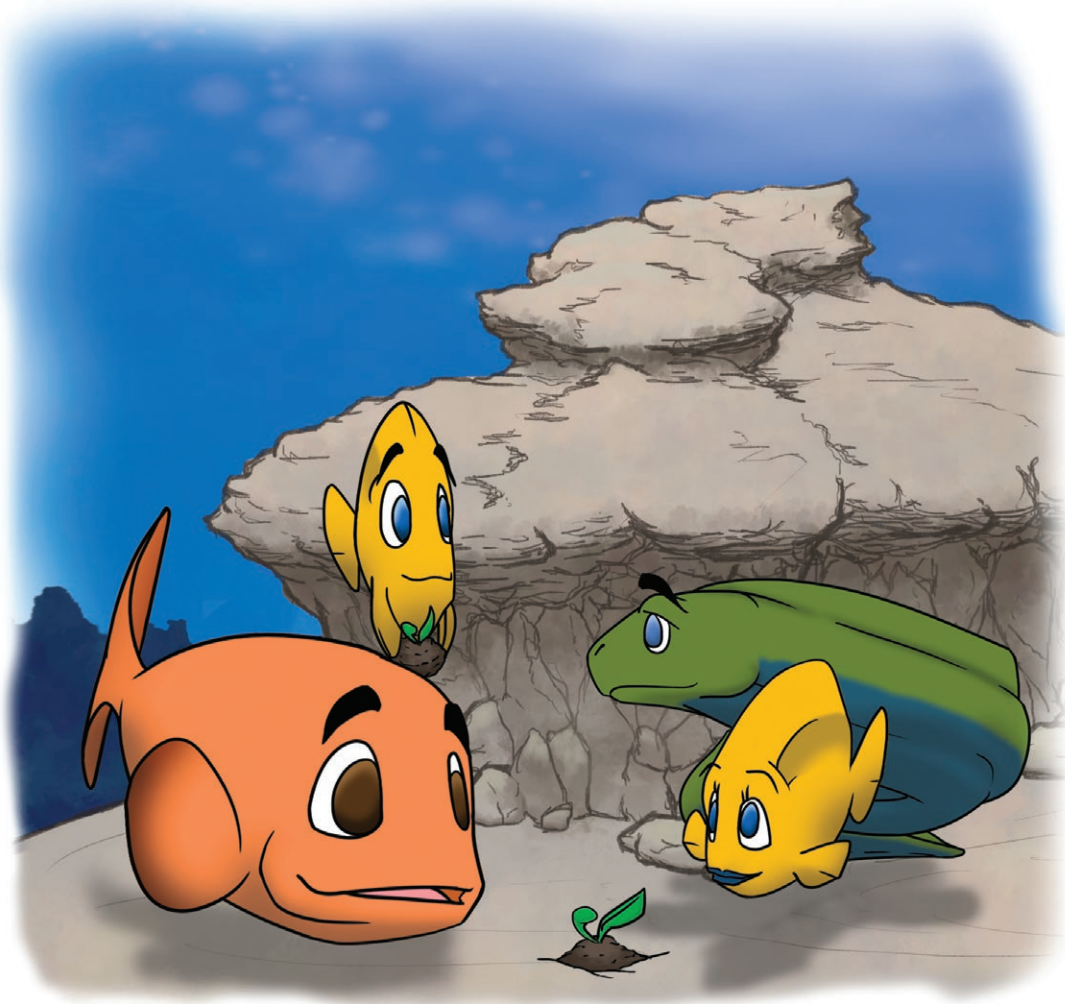


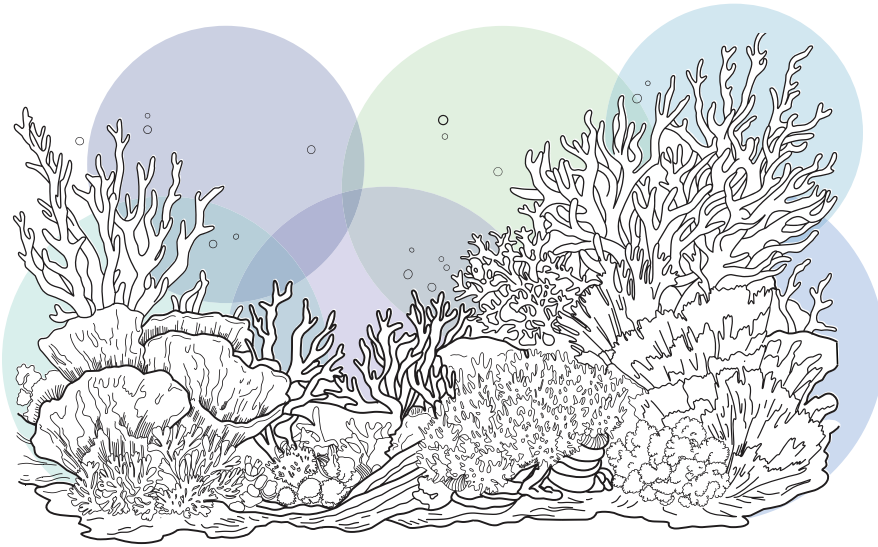
Gracie whispered to her friends that she was secretly glad they’d had this problem to solve, because it gave her time to try to discover what she knew how to do best.

Angie laughed and said, “Gracie, we all know what your gift is already. You care for others more than anyone else we know, and you’ve already given that report by solving this problem. I couldn’t do it with all of my plant knowledge, but you could because you listen and care for others.”

“Yeah!” said Gus. “You brought us all together like you always do.”

Now it was Gracie’s turn to blush, and she quickly turned to Old Codfish and asked him to lead all of them in a bubble prayer to God-of-the-Seas. So, they prayed with all their hearts and on very full stomachs.





Gracie Makes a Coral Covenant

It was a lazy day on the coral reef. The sun streamed down from above, casting bright rays on the beautiful coral and making the water warm and wonderful. The young fish were gathered at Ephraim Eel's home and trying to decide what they would do next.

“What do you want to do?” said Gracie to Gus Grouper.

“I don't know. What do you want to do?” Gus asked Benji and Belinda Butterflyfish.

“Well we could ...” began Belinda.

“Naw! We did that yesterday,” interrupted Benji. The twins were so close that they often could finish each other's thoughts and even sentences.

“For heaven's sake!” exclaimed Angie Angelfish, just swimming up. “Haven't you moved from when I was here an hour ago?”

“We were trying to decide what to do,” replied Ephraim. “But it’s so hard to decide when it’s just so comfortable being together here,” he finished with a yawn.

“Well, I’ve been busy planting algae in a new part of the reef,” said Angie proudly. “Do you want to see?”

Since none of them could think of a better plan, they swam together to where Angie had planted the algae. Only, instead of beautiful green, growing seedlings, they only saw withered brown plants.

“I don’t think your plants are doing so well,” said Benji, stating what they were all thinking.

“I don’t understand,” said Angie, tearing up. “I wasn’t gone all that long. What could hate my little plants so much to hurt them like this?”

All the fish began to look around for some type of predator who might have a grudge against algae, but there was no one to be found.

“Why don’t we ask the coral next to where you planted?” suggested Gracie. “They certainly would have seen anything that damaged your plants.”

They all agreed that this was a great suggestion. Gracie was elected to be the spokesfish as this had been her idea.

She wasn’t sure how to address the large branches of the coral colony in front of her. Did you talk to them all at once or individually? Was there a certain part of the coral colony that was more important than another part?

Finally, she just decided to use a loud voice and speak to the entire colony.

“ATTENTION, CORAL COLONY! HAVE YOU SEEN WHAT KILLED THE LITTLE ALGAE PLANTS NEAR YOU?” yelled Gracie. All the other fish swam away, because Gracie’s voice was so loud.

“Please don’t yell!” came a small voice from the coral, but it was so tiny that Gracie couldn’t make out the words.

“COULD YOU REPEAT THAT?” yelled Gracie again.

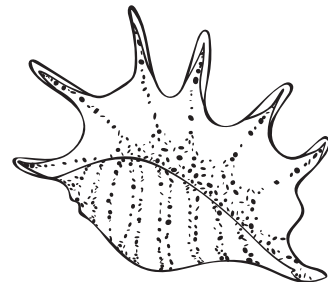
“Please don’t yell!” said the voice again, but it was still so soft that Gracie couldn’t hear it well.

“Any suggestions?” asked Gracie spinning around and addressing her friends who were some distance away.

“Perhaps I could be helpful,” said a new voice from below in the sand.

Gracie looked down and saw a large, cone-shaped shell with long spikes sticking out around the edges.

“My name is Samuel Spider Conch,” said the shell, or rather the creature inside it. “I couldn’t help overhearing your attempt to talk to the coral colony.”



“Everyone in the Red Sea could have overheard her,” muttered Benji.

“Anyway, perhaps my shell could be helpful to your conversation,” continued Samuel.

Gracie didn’t see how a shell could help her communicate with the coral colony, but she was willing to take any help she could get. “What do you suggest?” Gracie politely asked their new friend, Samuel.

“I think perhaps if I was closer to the coral and you talked through one of spikes on this end and I pointed another of my spikes toward the coral, perhaps the sound could be amplified within my shell so that you won’t have to shout and someone from the coral colony could be heard,” suggested Samuel.

“Like a megaphone or a cup telephone!” exclaimed Belinda, who was very interested in science and inventions.

“Let’s try it!” exclaimed Gracie.

Gus volunteered to lift Samuel up on his nose, so that he was midway up the coral colony branch, since this was the area where Gracie had directed her shouting earlier.

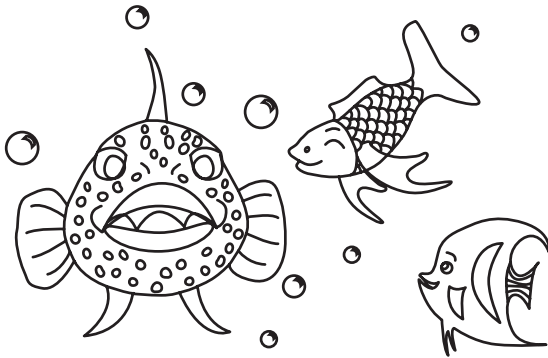
Gracie cleared her throat and decided to address the coral colony as friends this time. “Greetings, friend corals!

We would like to know if you have seen what harmed the little plants next to you, please,” she asked politely.

The voice from the coral came back loud and clear this time, thanks to Samuel’s natural shell amplification.

“Thank you for not yelling,” said the voice. “My name is Camila Coral. I am one of the thousands of coral animals making up this colony, and I’m happy to meet you.”

Gracie repeated her question about the plants and the two began a long conversation. It seems that the coral colony was growing larger in this fine weather and clear water. They were running out of space and had sent advance tentacles out to secure more land for new coral animals to build on. Angie had unfortunately planted her seedlings on the land the coral colony had marked for future building, so the coral colony had been the ones to destroy the plants. Camila apologized on behalf of the coral colony, but was firm that they needed this space. Gracie relayed all of this to Angie and her other friends.



Angie felt bad about taking the coral colony’s land, but she also wondered how she would know where she could plant her algae next.

“Perhaps we could make a covenant,” suggested Gracie. She remembered that Old Codfish had once told her stories about the Hebrew people and others who made covenants with each other and with the God of the Seas.

“What’s a covenant?” asked Camila.

“It is an agreement between two parties to be in relationship with each other so that both benefit,” recited Gracie remembering what she had been taught.

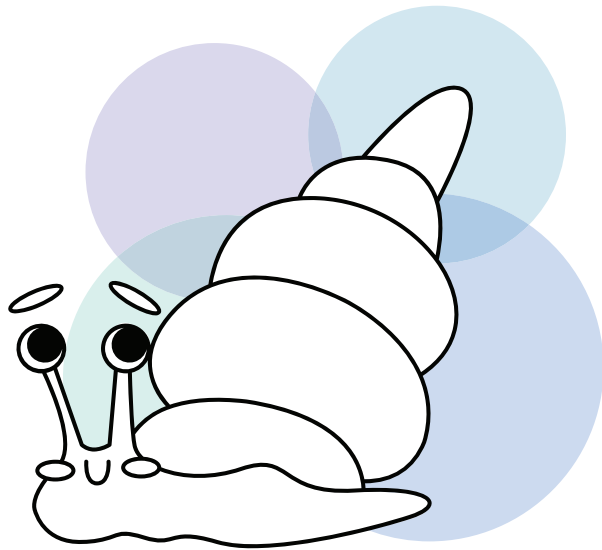
“So, perhaps we could agree that your algae plants would not be planted closer than 10 feet from our coral colony,” said Camila.

“And perhaps your colony could agree to build in the opposite direction from my plants, so that they could grow for a long time,” offered Angie.

“That sounds like a covenant to me!” exclaimed Gracie.

Both parties agreed to these terms and then the covenant was sealed by everyone offering a bubble prayer to God of the Seas that they would be able to live together in peace for many years to come.

The fish swam in circles around the coral colony as Samuel amplified the grateful songs of praise of all the tiny coral animals. Everyone decided it had been a good day as they went their separate ways and agreed that they were glad that their covenant had brought them some new friends.



Gracie Helps a Hermit

“1, 2, 3, 4, 5...” Gracie was counting slowly as her friends began to find places to hide. They were playing a game of Hide and Seek after school and it was her turn to be the one who found the others. There were six of them playing all together, so she would need to use her best finding skills to discover them. Gus was always pretty easy to find, because as a grouper he was very large and there just weren’t that many places that a grouper could hide within the coral reef. Ephraim Eel was usually the most difficult to find. As an eel he could often slither into places that were difficult for the others to go. “98, 99, 100 — Ready or not here I come!”, cried Gracie.

She turned around from the rock she had been facing and immediately saw Gus trying to hide behind some branch coral. She swam quickly over and tagged him on his tail, before he even had a chance to move. As she moved to the left, she caught a glimpse of some shiny scales down near the sandy bottom and knew they must belong to her best friend, Angie, as she was hiding behind some algae, which Angie loved to plant. After tagging her on the fin, Gracie discovered Benji and Belinda Butterflyfish over by some rocks. She could hear them before she saw them, as they were arguing over who

would be the last to be tagged. Gracie tagged both at once as she swam between them.

Finally only Ephraim Eel was left. Gracie enlisted all her other friends to help her find him, as he was always so difficult to spot. Some swam up near the surface. Others looked deep within the coral reef. Gracie decided to concentrate her efforts near the bottom, as she knew Ephraim really liked caves.

As she was swimming near the sand, close to the reef, she heard what sounded like crying. She listened carefully and sure enough there seemed to be a tiny snail shell down below that was deeply sad and crying so hard that it was shaking. She swam quickly down to the shell and said, “Are you all right?”

But the shell was crying so hard that it didn’t hear her.

She tapped it gently and said, “Excuse me, but can I help you?”

Slowly the shell stopped shaking quite so much and a tiny crab poked its tentacles and claws out of the shell, looking around very nervously. “Have you come to take away this home, too?” said a small voice, trying to hold back the tears.

“Why would I want to take away your home?” said Gracie. “My name is Gracie and I live in the branch coral over there,” indicated Gracie pointing her fin.

The next part was a little difficult to understand, as the tiny crab was having difficulty stopping his crying and so this is what Gracie heard between the sniffs and sobs.

“My name is Herman,” sniffed the little crab. “I am a hermit crab...live in shells of other animals...traveled a long way...lost track of family...old reef was dying...no food...big crabs are bullies...this shell is too small...it pinches.

“Well, if your shell is too small, why don’t you live in a bigger home?” said Gracie, settling on the last problem that Herman had said. “There must be other shells around here.”

“Every time I find a larger shell, a bigger hermit crab always takes it away from me. I am just too little,” said Herman.

“Everyone deserves a home!” stated Gracie strongly. “Perhaps my friends and I can help you find a new shell and you can stay with us until we find your family. We’ll make sure the larger hermit crabs don’t take your home this time.”

“Would you really? But I don’t think I can move in this tiny shell to even find another shell. I am so cramped in here,” sighed Herman.

“How about if we bring the shells to you?” cried Gracie as she thought of this plan.

“Could you do that?” asked Herman.

“I’m sure my friends would be willing to help,” said Gracie. She signaled to the others to join her and explained to them about Herman’s housing problem. Each of them immediately went in search of other snail shells. Everyone brought back at least one and Gus found a whole lot of shells in various sizes.

Herman looked at all his choices and saw two different shells that looked like they would be just the right size. He crawled over to the first one. It was

brown and white with some black dots around the top of the shell. He was just about to try it on for size when an angry voice said, “This shell is occupied!” A purple bodied snail stuck its tentacles furiously in Herman’s face and quickly (at least for a snail) moved away from the pile of shells the fish had collected.

“Whoops,” said Benji blushing. “I guess I forgot to check that it was empty.”

Herman turned his attention to the second shell that was about the same size. This one had black and white swirls on it. He knocked on the shell and said, “Anyone home?” He wanted to make sure that he didn’t make another creature angry. No one answered this time, so Herman came as close to the shell as he could then carefully transferred his body from the little shell to this bigger shell.

“How is it, Herman?” asked Gracie

“Ah! Just right!” said Herman. He was so happy that he did a little jig in his new shell and Gracie and her friends all laughed along with him.

“Isn’t anyone going to try to find me?” said Ephraim Eel as he joined the noisy group.

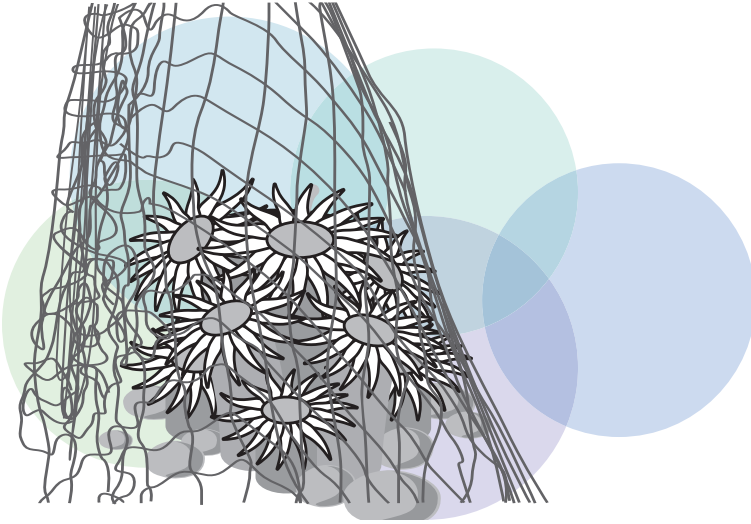
“Oh, goodness,” exclaimed Belinda. “We forgot completely about the game. Have you been hiding all this time, Ephraim?”

“Yes,” laughed Ephraim. “But, I could hear what you were doing and I think it was more important to help Herman find a new home. Hey, Herman now that you have a more comfortable home do you want to play with us? You can be it.”

Herman agreed. Before they began another game, however, Gracie thought it would be a good idea for them to send a bubble prayer of thanksgiving to the God of the Seas for Herman's new home and their friendship together. She also sent a passing seahorse to find Old Codfish, their teacher. She was sure that as wise as he was, he would be able to come up with a plan to locate Herman's family. The group gathered in a circle with Herman in the center and each fish said a blessing for Herman's new home and all gave each other high fives with their fins, claws, or tails.

Then Herman began the count again, "1, 2, 3, 4, 5..." and all of his new friends began looking for good hiding places.





Gracie and the Fishing Net

Gracie and her friends were bored. It seemed like every day was like every other day. They woke up and did the same things and played the same games. They had met many new friends during their time on the Red Sea coral reef, but all of these friends seemed to have other things to do and Gracie's old friends were feeling cranky with each other, because there was nothing new to see or do.

"All right," Gracie said, taking charge, "I've created a new game. Everyone has by the time I count to 100 to find one new object on the coral reef and bring it back here. Maybe we can create something new with all the objects we find."

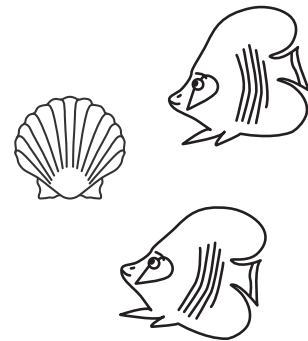
"Wow! That does sound different, Gracie," said Angie Angelfish, Gracie's best friend, who was always willing to support her in her plans.

"Well, it sounds better than complaining about how bored we are," Benji Butterflyfish said with a sigh. "When do we start?" asked his sister, Belinda.

“Right now,” said Gracie, “1, 2, 3 ...”

The fish began to scatter. Gus Grouper went to the cave on the other side of the branch coral colony. He knew that the smaller fish would be too scared to go in there. Benji and Belinda stayed together and headed toward where the crabs lived, as they often would find objects and use them to build forts to mark their territories. Angie headed to her garden hoping to find a new underwater plant. Ephraim Eel slithered in and out of the coral colony to the other side, hoping to find something new.

Gracie finished her counting, “98, 99, 100,” and the fish began to return with the things they had found. Gus had found a pretty rock with shiny silver sheets of mica on it. Benji and Belinda brought back a beautiful scallop shell that they had found near where the crabs live. Angie contributed a seed that was unlike any she had seen before and wondered what would grow from it.



“These are all beautiful,” thought Gracie, “but I’m not sure what we can make from a rock, a shell and a seed.”

Then, Ephraim arrived, and he was all excited. “I have found the most wonderful thing on the other side of the reef, but it was too big to bring to you. You all have to come and see this.”

So, all the fish swam to the other side of the reef. What they saw was a large object made of twine that was tied and knotted together so it made almost a carpet on the sandy bottom.

“Let’s all take a strand of this in different places and pull it out, so we can see how large it is,” said Gracie.

All of them took a piece of the twine and pulled the large object so it was stretched out in all directions. It was much bigger than Gus, who was the biggest fish among them.

“I wonder what we could do with this,” Benji said as he gripped the twine in his mouth.

“Let’s make it go up and down,” said his sister, Belinda.

The fish lifted their parts of the object up and down and created some small waves that some of the nearby creatures enjoyed trying to ride, almost like they were surfing.

“Let me try,” said Gracie and she released her portion of the twine and felt the wave carry her along in the water.

Each fish took a turn as the others continued to hold the twine. They were having a great time, when suddenly they heard a voice from one of their classmates saying, “Hey, guys! You’re going to be late for school. Better hurry!”

The fish dropped the twine they were holding, and it gently settled on some sun coral. They hurried on to their school, where Old Codfish was just ending a lesson on the ecosystem of the coral reef.

“And so, my students, we are all linked together within the ecosystem of this coral reef and everything we do affects those around us,” concluded Old Codfish.

Gracie and her friends tried to sneak in without being seen, but Old Codfish was a wise fish and was not fooled by his students' antics. "I see you there, Gracie, Gus, Ephraim, Angie, Benji and Belinda. Perhaps you could share with the class why you were late this morning." "We found something new, sir," Gracie stated politely. "We were playing with it and I guess we lost track of the time."

"Let's go see this new thing," Old Codfish said. "Perhaps it will help us see what happens when something new enters an ecosystem."

The whole class was excited about the prospect of a field trip and headed out to the reef. They showed Old Codfish and the others the large object they had found with excitement.

"This is a fishing net," said Old Codfish sadly. "It must have fallen off one of the fishing boats headed back to port. It is an object that can be dangerous to some sea creatures when it is used in a certain way, but right now it is a danger to this sun coral colony. Let's all take a piece of it and pull it off of them together, putting it in a safe place on the ocean floor."

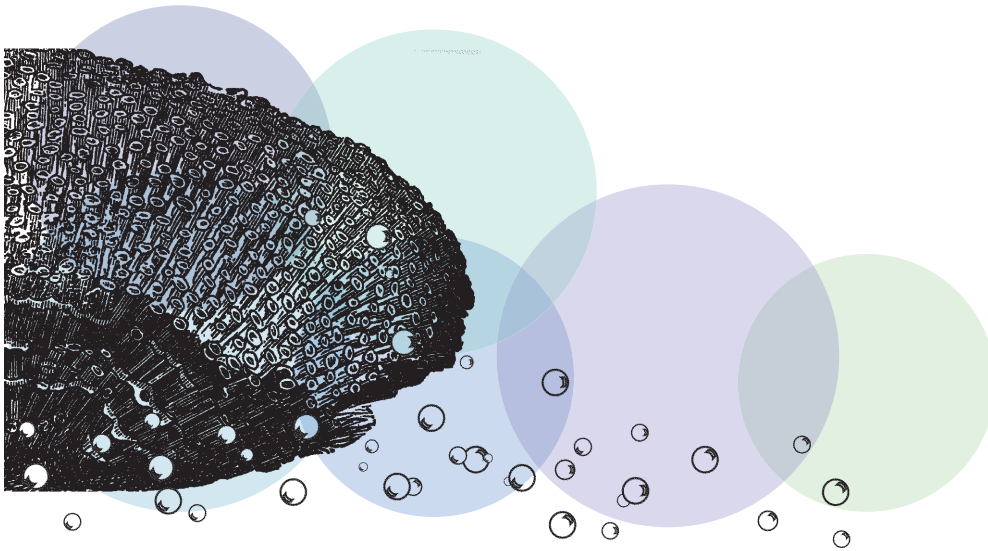
So, each fish took a bit of the fishing net in their mouths and stretched the net out to its full size. Once they had taken it off of the sun coral, they swam with it until they were over a bare spot in the ocean bottom and dropped the net.

As it settled to the ocean floor, Old Codfish looked at the net and said, "Gracie, I think you and your friends have found the perfect object to go along with my lesson. It is all connected by the twines and knots you see, and it took all of us working together to keep it safe and to protect the coral,

as well. Let's all say a bubble prayer to the God of the Seas for bringing us together today and showing us how we are all connected through our care for each other."

And so, they prayed together, and as Gracie thought back on her day, she smiled, because it hadn't been a boring day after all and they had learned something new about their world.





Gracie Finds Her Gift

It was another beautiful day on the Red Sea coral reef. Gracie and her friends were playing a new game they had made up seeing who could blow the biggest bubble or who could blow the most interesting shape or who could make the most bubbles in one breath. Each of them seemed to do one of these things well, but not all of them.

All at once they heard a loud noise that could only mean one thing — an outboard motor on a boat. All the fish scattered and hid among the coral far from the surface of the water. The sound changed at one point as the motor seemed to run into something. Gracie and her fish friends watched horrified as a chunk of a pipe organ coral was knocked away from its colony by the propellers on the boat motor.

“Oh, no!” thought Gracie. “If we don’t do something, this coral will die apart from its coral buddies.” She called out to her friends, and they all swam to where the pipe organ coral piece lay on the sandy bottom.

They looked at each other helpless to reunite this piece of coral with the rest of its family. What could they do as little fish? They prayed to the God of the Seas to help them save this coral family.

Gracie turned to Ephraim Eel, who was great at building things, and asked him if he knew of anything that they could build that would help the broken pipe organ coral to grow and survive. Ephraim thought about it and recalled that he had heard of divers who tied broken pieces of coral onto sturdy plants so that they could continue to grow and thrive near their previous colony.

“Great idea!” said the others, but they really didn’t know where to begin this task.

“Angie Angelfish,” said Gracie, “you know more about plants than any other fish around. What type of wood would be sturdy enough to hold the coral, yet light enough that some of us could plant it in the sand?”

“Bamboo” Angie replied immediately. “It is strong enough to hold the colony, but hollow on the inside, so it makes for a lighter building material.”

“That sounds perfect,” said Gracie. “Gus Grouper, you are the strongest, so can you find us a piece of bamboo that will work?”

“I’d be happy to,” replied Gus, and off he went in search of just the right piece of bamboo.

“We’ll need something to tie the pipe organ coral to the bamboo pole once Gus finds it,” said Gracie. “Angie, what type of plant makes the best tying rope?”

Angie thought about this for a while and chose a particular sea grass that was long and strong, but fairly easy to tie.

“Benji and Belinda Butterflyfish, you work together so well as brother and sister,” said Gracie, “I think you should be the ones to tie the pipe organ coral to the bamboo pole with the grass, and Ephraim, you can hold the pole steady by wrapping your body around it.”

Each of Gracie’s friends did their part in making this repair. Gus brought the bamboo pole. Angie pointed out the best grasses to use. Ephraim steadied the pole with his body and Benji and Belinda tied the grass around the coral onto the pole until it was secure.

After they had finished the job, they all admired their work and congratulated each other on a job well done. Only Gracie seemed sad and discouraged.

Angie was the first one to notice as they were best friends. “What’s wrong, Gracie?” she called. “Did we do something wrong?”

“No,” sniffled Gracie. “It looks beautiful and strong, and the pipe organ coral colony will live and grow.”

“Then, what’s the matter?” they all demanded.

“All of you were able to use your gifts in doing this important thing to save the coral colony, but I didn’t have any gift to give,” said Gracie. “I wish that I was a builder like Ephraim or knew a lot about plants, like Angie, or was strong like Gus, or worked together in a team like Benji and Belinda, but I don’t have any of those gifts.”

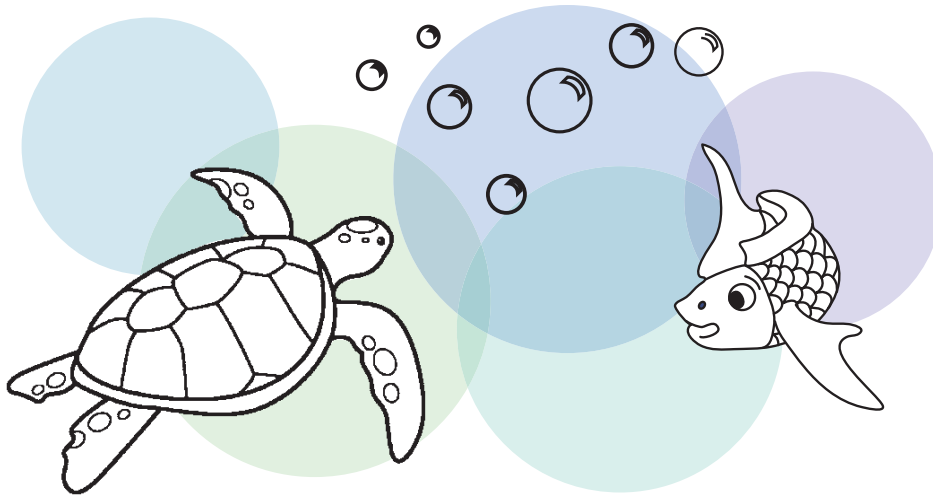
At this moment, Old Codfish, who had been watching the group for some time now, came swimming over to respond to Gracie. “But Gracie,” he said, “you have a very important gift that you gave to this project that no one else has.”

“What is that?” Gracie sniffled, unconvinced.

“You were able to see the gifts in all of your friends and to bring them together for the good of the pipe organ colony,” said Old Codfish. “This is a very important gift indeed and you should celebrate it, as well as the gifts of your friends.”

“Yes!” chorused all her friends. “Without you, we would never have been able to build this home for the coral colony. You saw what we could give, and we did!”

“Let’s all blow a bubble necklace of blessing around this pipe organ coral construction and welcome them to their new home,” cried Gracie, suddenly feeling much better. And they did. Some blew big bubbles. Some blew bubbles in weird and interesting shapes. Some blew many, many small bubbles, but together they surrounded the coral colony in love and prayers for new life.



Gracie and the Green Sea Turtle

It was a bright sunny day within the Red Sea coral reef. Gracie and her friends Angie Angelfish and Belinda Butterflyfish were having a girls-only play date. They had started a game of Follow the Leader. Each girl took a turn being the leader. Angie led by swimming upside down.

Belinda led by singing a bubble song while she swam. Gracie led by swimming around in circles that got bigger and bigger as she swam.

While they were playing their game, Old Codfish watched from beside a fan coral with a grin on his face. He remembered his own days of play from his childhood, and watching the girls brought back these good memories.

When the girls tired of their game, they came over to Old Codfish and asked what they should do next.

Old Codfish replied, "I would love to introduce you to our latest visitor. Her name is Tabitha, and she is a green sea turtle."

“A green sea turtle!” exclaimed Gracie. “I’ve never met a sea turtle before.”

“Well, you don’t see them very often this close to the shore, but Tabitha has come back to lay her eggs on the same beach where she was born years ago,” answered Old Codfish.

“We would love to meet this almost mother sea turtle,” chorused all three of the girl fish.

The four of them journeyed closer to the shore and saw in front of them Tabitha, the green sea turtle, resting up after her long journey.

“Greetings, little fishes!” remarked Tabitha. “Old Codfish, it is good to see you again. I’m afraid you are a little early, if you came to bless my eggs.”

“Tabitha, I brought these very bright girl fish to meet you, because of your work with the Lydia Club. I hope you will share your wisdom with them and help them to become true leaders,” Old Codfish replied before swimming away.

“Hmm, I do have some time before the tide is right to lay my eggs. Tell me, little ones, do you know who Lydia was in the God of the Seas stories?” Tabitha asked.

“No, we have never heard of her,” replied Gracie, speaking on behalf of all of them.

“Lydia was one of the first people in her region to begin following the Son of the God of the Seas. She was a businesswoman and sold fine purple cloth and inspired the Lydia Club,” Tabitha told the girls.

“So, what is the Lydia Club?” asked Belinda. “Is it sort of like a fan club for Lydia?”

“Not exactly,” replied Tabitha. “It is an organization throughout the seas that helps smart young fish like yourselves to start businesses that serve others.”

“What kind of businesses?” asked Angie, thinking of all her algae plants.

“Any kind where you can use your gifts for helping others,” answered Tabitha.

“I’ve always wanted to sell my algae plants,” continued Angie. “I have so many, too many for myself and my friends.”

“It sounds like you are a gardener, so selling your plants would be a good business to start,” said Tabitha.

“Perhaps you could sell your plants to sea creatures who live in places where there are not many growing things. We learned a while back that these are called food deserts,” suggested Gracie.

“Yes!” Angie said enthusiastically. “That way my plants will serve many others who really need them.”

“That sounds like a good business plan, Angie, that will benefit many others,” agreed Tabitha. “What business would you like to start, Belinda? It looks like you have an idea.”

“I love music,” said Belinda. “I’ve even composed a few songs. Maybe I could sell my songs to others who love music, too.”

“Ooh!” said Gracie. “What if you composed some new songs for different feelings, like happy songs, sad songs, songs when you’re afraid or angry? That way, depending on how the sea creature is feeling, you would have a song just for them.”

“That’s a great idea!” said Belinda. “I already have an idea for a happy song from our day so far.”

“This reminds me of songs that were addressed to the God of the Seas,” Tabitha said thoughtfully. “Those songs are called psalms and they have all different moods to them. They remind me that I can bring all the ways that I feel at different times to the God of the Seas. Gracie, what business are you considering?”

Gracie paused for a long time and then said slowly, “I don’t think I have anything that I can sell. I made a treasure box once with shells and shiny things, but I don’t think I could make enough of these to start a business. Besides, I don’t see how the boxes would serve other sea creatures. Angie’s plants give people who don’t have fresh food something good to eat. Belinda’s songs help to show others that they are not alone in how they are feeling, but I don’t have anything like that to share.”

“Well,” replied Tabitha, “from what I have seen so far, you have a gift of serving others by giving good advice. You helped Angie find a market for her plants to creatures that really needed them. You helped Belinda to expand her thinking to composing songs for sea creatures who felt many different emotions.”

“That’s true,” said Gracie thoughtfully, “but is that really a business — helping others?”

“Do you know any stories about my namesake, Tabitha?” asked the sea turtle.

Gracie shook her head. Tabitha continued, “She was another woman who followed the Son of the God of the Seas. The people loved her because she was known for her good works and the way she served others.”

“So, I am like you, Tabitha?” Gracie asked shyly. “You have helped each of us become a better leader today.”

“I hope so,” replied Tabitha. “It is time for me now to lay my eggs, so I will need to leave you.”

“Can we come with you?” chorused the girls.

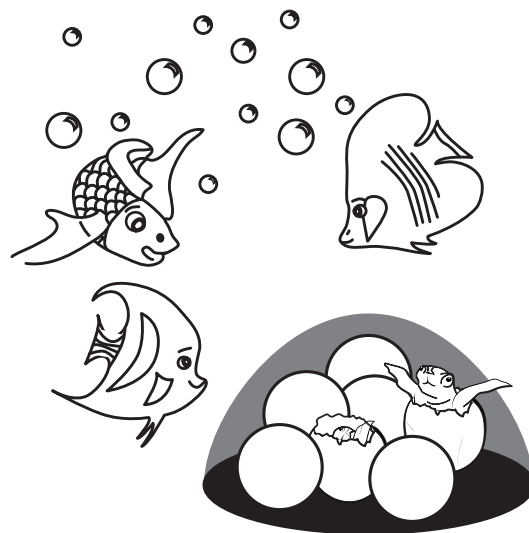
“You can escort me to the edge of the water, but I will need to crawl the rest of the way onto the beach where I was born in order to lay my eggs.”

The girls followed Tabitha and watched as she made her difficult trek to lay her eggs on the beach and then return to the water.

“Will the eggs be all right?” asked Gracie.

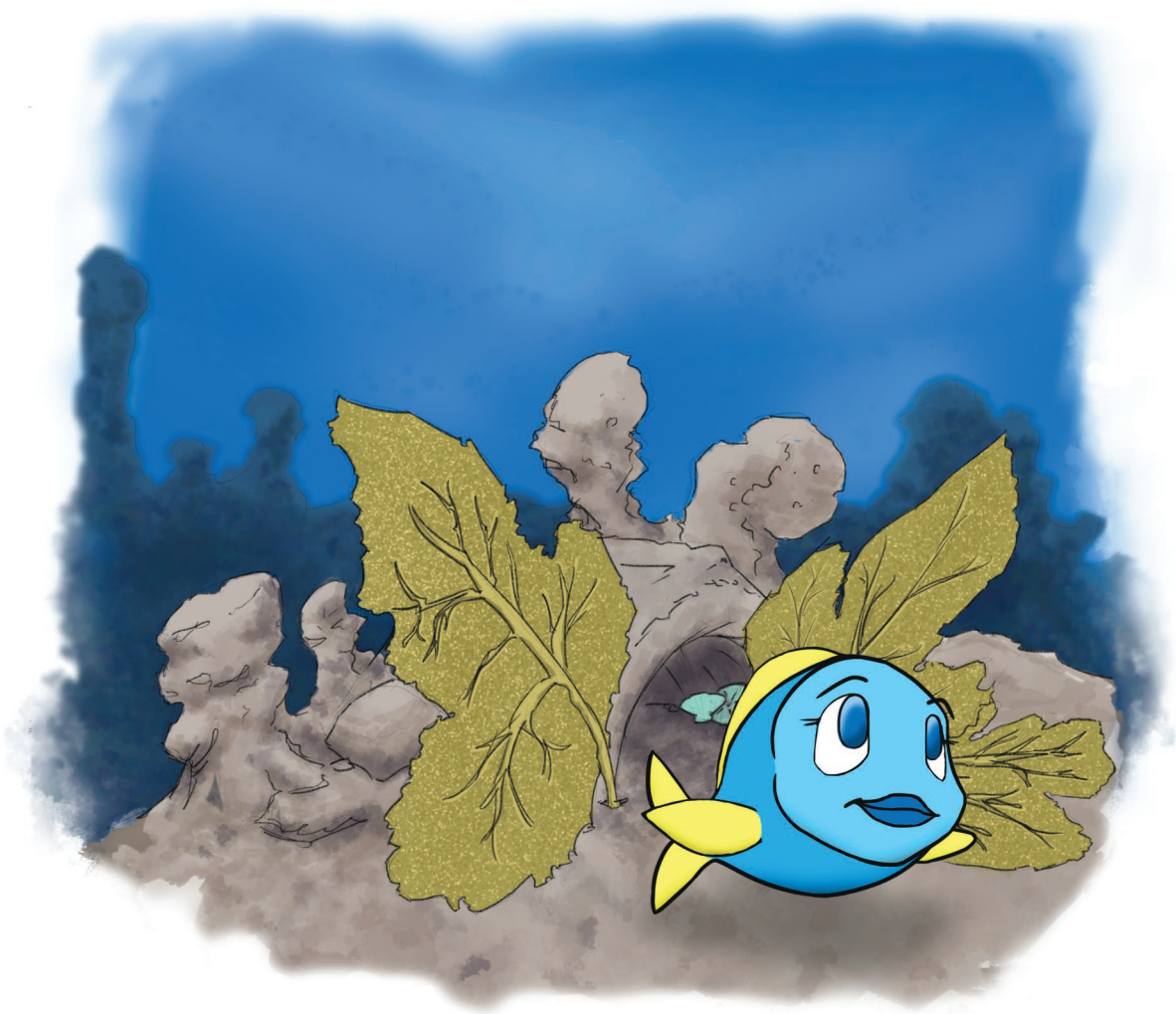
“I pray that the God of the Seas will watch over them,” replied Tabitha.

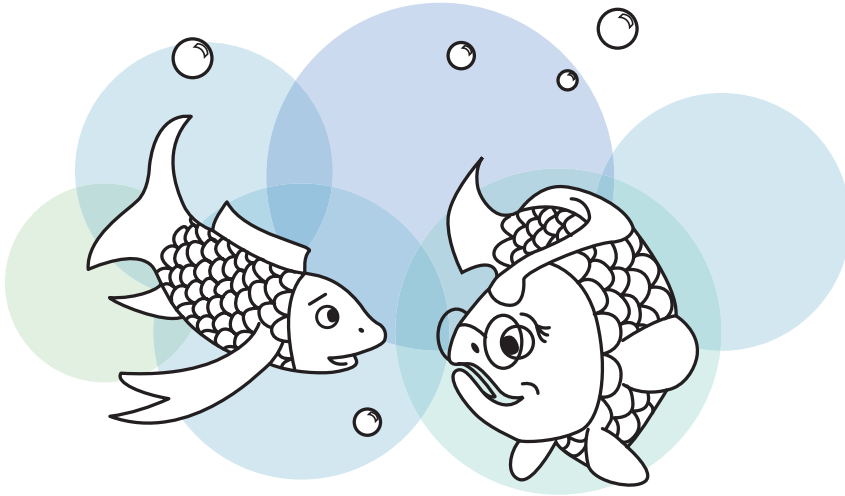
“We’ll watch and pray, too,” said Gracie, and her friends nodded.



Then Belinda led them in a happy song to the God of the Seas for their new friendship and ideas for leading others.

Afterward they feasted on Angie's most tasty algae and shared stories of their other adventures.





Gracie and the Birthday Party

Today was a special day in the Red Sea coral reef. The weather was beautiful and the sea just the right temperature for a wonderful celebration.

“I love a surprise!” Gracie said to her friends as they gathered to talk about the surprise birthday party for their beloved teacher, Old Codfish.

“I like the games,” replied Benji Butterflyfish.

“I can’t wait to sing to him,” put in his sister Belinda.

“I’ll make a big algae cake from my best tasting plants,” indicated Angie Angelfish.

“I’ll greet all the party guests,” volunteered Efraim Eel.

“I wonder who we should invite,” pondered Gracie. “Who are Old Codfish’s friends?”

The friends shared their memories of past years. One remembered that last year, Old Codfish had introduced them to Tabitha, the Green Sea Turtle.

Perhaps she was in the area checking on her babies and possibly laying more eggs. Another friend remembered that long ago they had met Grandmother Oyster (*Gracie and the Great Pearl*, page 31). She had been the oldest sea creature they had met.

“Old Codfish and Grandmother Oyster must know each other, because they have lived in this Red Sea for so long,” Gracie reasoned. “Perhaps we should try to find the oldest sea creatures in our coral reef to invite to the party.”

Each of the friends agreed to swim in a different direction and ask some others who lived in the reef to tell them of the oldest sea creatures that they knew.

Efraim found a fiddler crab who had heard of a red sea urchin who lived to be 100 years old, but they didn’t live anywhere close to the Red Sea, despite their name.

Angie talked to a friendly grey reef shark, who knew that Greenland sharks could live as long as 400 years, but they lived far to the north where the water is cold, so they could not come to the Red Sea.

Benji and Belinda talked to a colony of sun coral, who knew that red coral in the tropics can live to be over 500 years old, but they can’t travel.

All the friends returned to their meeting place by the branch coral and were discouraged. They had found out some of the oldest sea creatures, but none of these animals could come to Old Codfish’s birthday party.

As they sighed over their failure, who should swim up but Old Codfish himself.

“All of you look a little down in the gills today,” noticed Old Codfish.

“We can’t tell you why,” said Gracie.

“Why not?” inquired Old Codfish. “Perhaps I can help.”

“No, you can’t,” blurted out Benji. “It’s a surprise for you!”

“Well,” Old Codfish began, “since this is my birthday, I would guess this surprise has something to do with today. Am I right?”

“Now you’ve done it, Benji,” said his sister Belinda. “Our party won’t be a surprise any longer.”

“I didn’t say it was a party,” protested Benji. “You gave that away.”

Old Codfish raised a fin so that the siblings wouldn’t argue anymore. “If I promise to act surprised, could someone tell me what the problem is?”

Gracie swam forward and bubbled nervously. She didn’t know how to bring up Old Codfish’s age. She decided to just lay out the problem simply. “We were trying to invite other sea creatures to your party, but we weren’t sure who your friends were, so we simply asked those we met who the oldest sea creatures were and none of them could come.”

“I see,” chuckled Old Codfish. “You thought because I am older that all my friends must be old as well.”

“Yes,” agreed Gracie. “We found out about sea creatures who were 100, 400 and 500 years old.”

“Well, I am certainly not that old,” said Old Codfish, pretending to be offended. “But, I have many friends and former students who are all different ages. I am only 17 years old, but that is pretty old for a codfish. I do know of some jellyfish friends, who are called ‘immortal jellyfish.’ They never get old. Each time they get injured, they go back into their young state and start all over again.”



“That’s amazing!” said all the friends at once.

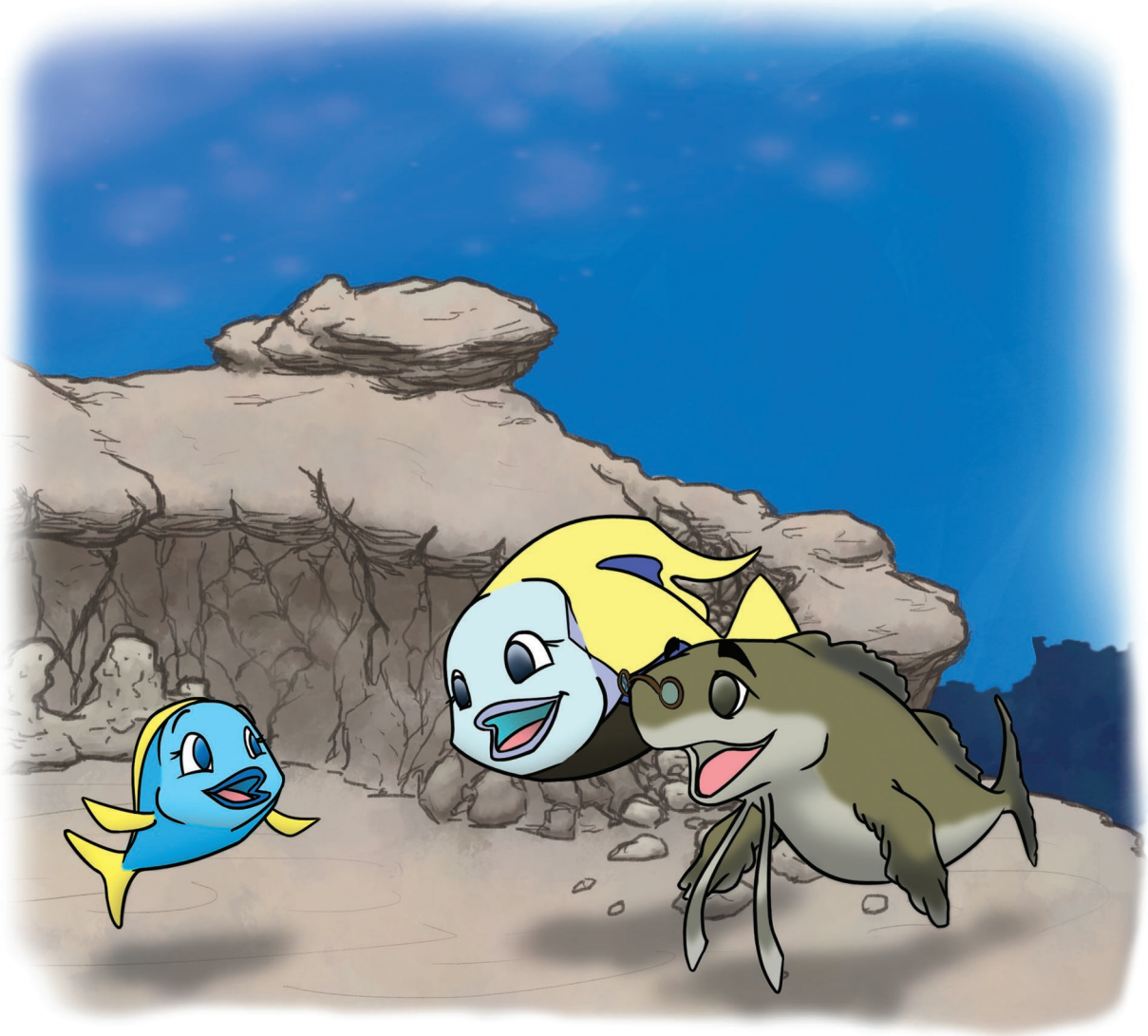
“Yes,” replied Old Codfish. “Most of us, however, do the best we can to help others while we’re here, no matter how long that may be. Speaking of being helpful, I heard that there are people all around the world who have been doing just that for a long time. So long, in fact, that they are celebrating 75 years of helping others.”

“That is a long time,” said Angie Angelfish.

“So, let’s help Old Codfish have the best surprise that is not a surprise birthday party ever!” Gracie said excitedly. “We can invite all those we know around the Red Sea reef who have been a part of our stories for many years. All of you already know what you volunteered to do. Let’s get busy, and Old Codfish, if you can come back in about an hour and look surprised like you promised, we’ll have the best birthday party ever just for you.”

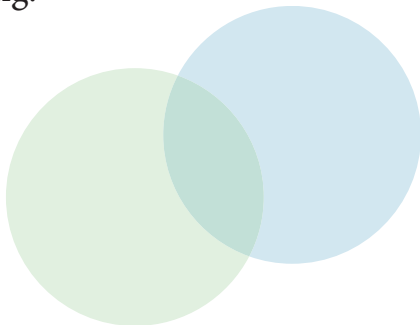
Old Codfish agreed, and all the friends went about their jobs getting ready for the party and inviting all of their friends they had met along the way to come and celebrate with them.

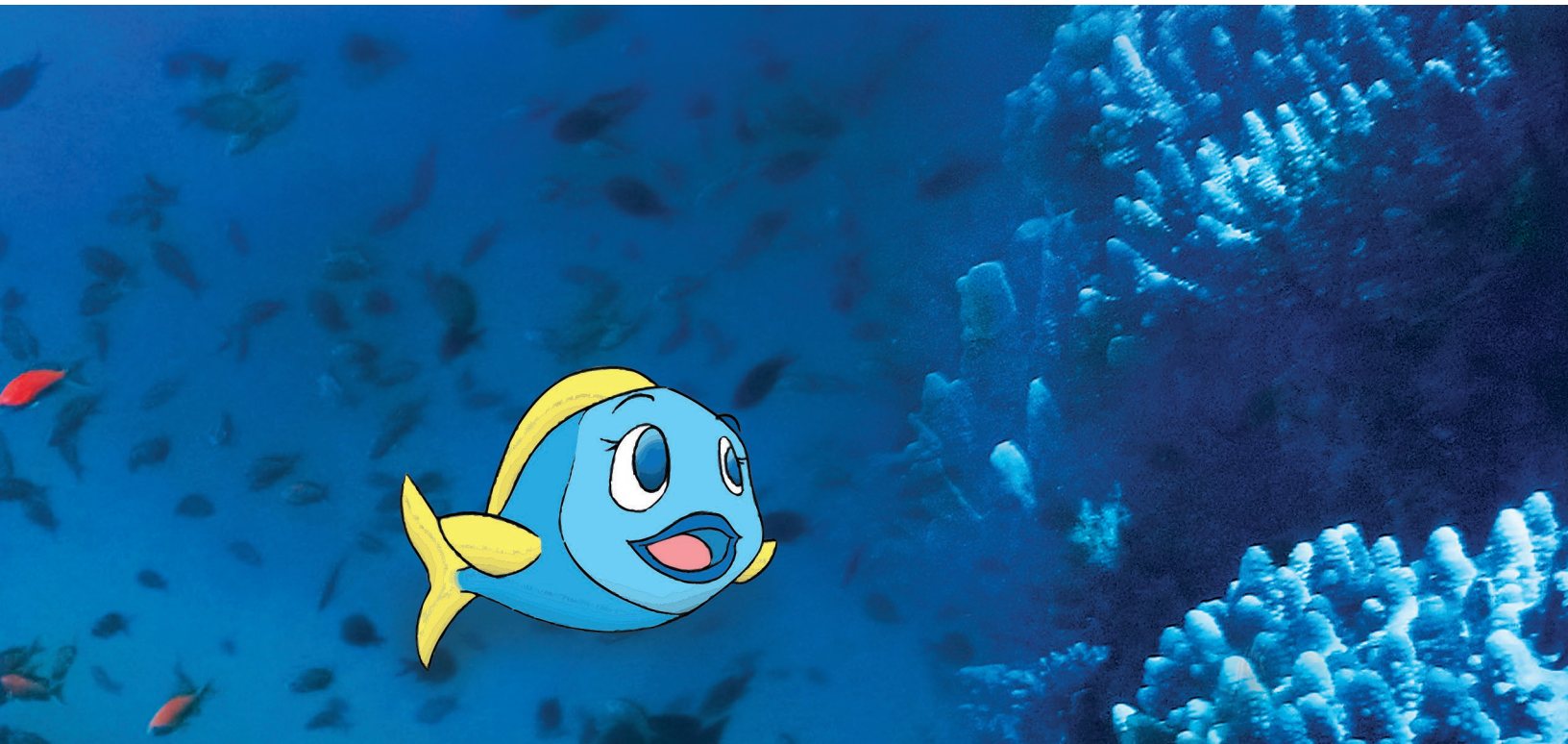
When Old Codfish returned, he gave them the biggest surprised face they could have wished for and all the guests played games, sang songs, ate algae cake and told stories long into the night. Finally, they bubbled a prayer of thanks to the God of the seas for all of their years of friendship and helping others and swam off to their various homes among the coral tired but happy for the time they had shared.





Kathy Dawson serves on the faculty of Columbia Theological Seminary as the Benton Family Associate Professor of Christian Education. She also directs the Wonder of Worship grant initiative, working with churches to engage children more fully in worship and prayer. Kathy has been writing Gracie's stories for seventeen years and enjoys reconnecting with the Red Sea coral reef and all her fishy friends each year for One Great Hour of Sharing.





12138-24-124



ONE GREAT HOUR OF SHARING
SPECIAL OFFERINGS
HUNGER • DISASTER • DEVELOPMENT

