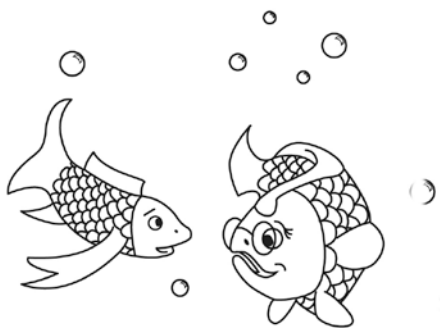


# One Great Hour of Sharing, 2015

## 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.

## Activities for Younger Children

1. Plant a bean seed or other fast-growing plant in soil or on a wet paper towel in a plastic sandwich bag. Watch it grow and measure its progress. Think about how many of these plants it would take to make one meal for your family.
2. Gracie found a way to help by remembering something that she knew how to do. How might you help those who are hungry? What might you be able to do as a class or family that you couldn't do on your own?
3. The Presbyterian Hunger Program is one of the agencies that receives the One Great Hour of Sharing offering. As a family or a class, explore some of the other ways that this program helps others. Find out more here:  
<http://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/hunger/>

## Activities for Older Children

1. Old Codfish spoke of a food desert. There are also food deserts in many of our cities. Do some research on the computer to find out what a food desert looks like on land and discover some of the ways that people are working together to get fresh produce to these places. Here's a place to start: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8My-iWjTBQ8>
2. Explore the Bible passage that Old Codfish mentions at the end of the story. Although it can be found in all four Gospels, you may want to read the version in John, because in this version one child's willingness to share begins the blessings. Check out John 6: 1-15. Think about what this story might have to say about those who are hungry today and what we can do about it.
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