

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.

Activities for Younger Children

1. What did Gracie think it meant to be a neighbor? What did she learn by the end of the story about being a neighbor? Who are your neighbors? How can you be a neighbor to them? How can they be neighbors to you?

2. This story spotlights the work of Self Development of People. This organization, supported by One Great Hour of Sharing, lets those who are in need be leaders in their community. Play a game where different people get to lead (something like Simon Says).

Why is it important to have different leaders? Why was it important for Liza and the mullets to lead the others in doing the play?

3. Where can you be a neighbor like Gracie and her friends, where you can listen to others who have less than you do? If you are reading this as a group or a family, think about people in your community who need to be heard.

Activities for Older Children

1. Old Codfish tells Gracie that God of the Seas says, "Hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts." This is from Romans 5:5. Read the verses around this quotation and think about what this might mean. Do you think it is difficult to be a neighbor in the way that Old Codfish is suggesting?

2. This story spotlights the work of Self-Development of People. Watch the short film clip about their work found here: <http://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/sdop/who-sdop/> What did you see that connects with Gracie's story? Can you say in your own words what you think Self-Development of People is about?

3. One of the ways that you can become a neighbor like Gracie is to support the One Great Hour of Sharing offering. What are other ways that you can listen to those who are poor and oppressed? Who are your neighbors? What are some ways that you can hear their stories?