A close-up of a sign

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**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 [2012 story]. 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.

Activities for All Ages

1. What is your favorite part of a birthday party? Have you ever been surprised by a birthday celebration? What was that like? Plan a birthday party for One Great Hour of Sharing. It is 75 years old this year! How can you celebrate all the people who have been helped over these years by the money that has gone to the Presbyterian Hunger Program, Presbyterian Disaster Assistance and Self-Development of People?
2. Gracie has a booklet with all of her stories this year. Spend part of Lent reliving your favorite Gracie stories and imagining all the sea creatures you meet along the way coming to Old Codfish’s birthday party. Who would you want to invite to your own birthday party who have been important people in your life of faith over the years?
3. Set a goal for One Great Hour of Sharing this year for your family, class or church. Try to incorporate the number 75 in your goal in some way or use one of the other numbers in our story (100, 400, 500) as your goal. If you meet your goal, be like the immortal jellyfish (<https://youtu.be/ayOmAJwCMlM?si=C1KEWbUSJyPTFtrL>) and start all over again!

Author

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