

## Starfish Jesus

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How many disciples does Jesus have?

Marine biologists can help us find the answer.

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Picture a starfish by the ocean. How many arms does it have?

One, two, three, four, five. Five arms.

Obvious, right?

Anyone who has walked the beach or visited an aquarium and seen one knows this. Even a child, playing in the sand over the Fourth of July, knows that a starfish has five arms.

But guess what? You're wrong.

***“The answer,”*** writes Dino Grandoni in ***The Washington Post***,

***“is stranger than anything most scientists expected.***

***Simply put, the sea star, also known as starfish,***

***appears to be mostly just a head.”***

So, the correct answer is ... **zero** arms.

Starfish are just **heads** that crawl along the seafloor.

If that is not surprising enough, Grandoni reports that starfish,

***“despite their strange appearance,***

***aren't that distantly related to humans,***

***sharing an ancestor 600 million years ago.”***

You may think that you have some odd-looking relatives.

Most of us do. But none quite as strange as a starfish.

When Jesus arrived at his hometown of Nazareth,

people were stunned by his wisdom and his deeds of power.

***“Where did this man get all this?”*** they asked,

after hearing him teach in the synagogue.

***“Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James***

***and Joses and Judas and Simon,***

***and are not his sisters here with us?”*** (Mark 6:2-3).

The people of Nazareth knew where Jesus came from,

and they were familiar with his family.

They never expected him to speak with tremendous wisdom

and perform deeds such as stilling a storm, casting out a demon,

healing a woman and restoring a little girl to life.

Like a starfish, Jesus was stranger than they expected.

He did not seem to be connected to the people of their town.

Mark tells us that they **“took offense at him”** (v. 3).

The Greek word is ***eskandalizonto***,

the root of our English word **“scandalized.”**

The words and actions of Jesus were shocking to the people of Nazareth.

Jesus knew that this was coming, so he said to them,

**“Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown  
and among their own kin and in their own house”** (v. 4).

He knew the long tradition of prophets not being respected  
in their own communities.

Jesus was following in the footsteps of Ezekiel, who was sent by God  
to the people of Israel, **“a nation of rebels.”**

God said to Ezekiel: **“You shall speak my words to them,  
whether they hear or refuse to hear,  
for they are a rebellious house”** (Ezekiel 2:3, 7).

The challenge of a true prophet is to speak God’s words,  
whether people are scandalized or not.

Ezekiel was such a prophet, as was Jesus.

The result of Nazareth’s rejection was that Jesus

**“could do no deed of power there, except that**

***he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them***” (Mark 6:5).

If Jesus had been a starfish,

the people of Nazareth would have tossed him back into the ocean.

Jesus left his hometown and went among the villages teaching.

Mark tells us that he ***“called the twelve and began to send them out two by two and gave them authority over the unclean spirits”***

(v. 7).

Jesus told them not to worry about rejection, just as he had not agonized over his treatment by the people of Nazareth.

Instead, he said, ***“If any place will not welcome you***

***and they refuse to hear you, as you leave,***

***shake off the dust that is on your feet***

***as a testimony against them”*** (v. 11).

As Taylor Swift knows so well,

***“the haters gonna hate, hate, hate, hate, hate.”***

When this happens, what do you do? ***“Shake it off.”***

The 12 disciples did this.

They ***“went out and proclaimed that all should repent”*** (v. 12).

And they were successful in their mission.

Mark tells us that they ***“cast out many demons and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them,”***  
just as Jesus had done (v. 13).

This brings us to the question: How many arms does Jesus have?

One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, 10, 11, 12.

You might think so because he called 12 disciples.

But the answer is zero arms. Like the starfish, Jesus is mostly just a head.

If we want to be disciples, we need to stay connected to Jesus,  
the head of the church.

And to learn exactly how we are attached to the head,  
we can follow the lead of starfish scientists.

They have a unique name for starfish appendages  
to avoid confusion about whether the extensions are arms or legs.

They call the appendages ***“rays,”***  
because they are extensions of the head.

Most starfish have five rays, but some have six or seven,  
and others between 10 and 15.

The Antarctic sun starfish starts off with five rays.

As it grows, it adds to this number and can reach a total of more than 50.

Jesus started with 12 rays; then the rays doubled and tripled in number.

Today, Jesus has 2.38 billion rays around the world.

And, like the starfish, if one ray is cut off, another grows to replace it.

Any disciple of Starfish Jesus can be called **“Ray.”**

Women and men can be named Ray. Children can be named Ray.

Every follower of Jesus is a Ray. We can be a ray of light,

a ray of hope, a ray of optimism ... even a cosmic ray.

(Just don't be a death ray.)

The apostle Paul probably did not know much about starfish,

but he saw clearly that Jesus is **“the head of the body, the church”**

(Colossians 1:18).

He understood us to be extensions of Jesus, the head, and he said,

**“Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.**

**And God has appointed in the church first apostles,**

**second prophets, third teachers, then deeds of power,**

**then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership,**

**various kinds of tongues”** (1 Corinthians 12:27-28).

What an amazing collection of rays:

Apostles, prophets, teachers, and people who can perform acts of power,  
healing, assistance, leadership, and language.

Like starfish appendages, we are a versatile group,

and every single ray is an extension of Jesus as the head.

***“In him all things hold together,”*** says Paul (Colossians 1:17).

If we are going to be a ray of Jesus, we need to ***have the mind of Christ.***

This means that we take his Sermon on the Mount

every bit as seriously as we take the Ten Commandments.

The mind of Christ is fixed on turning the other cheek

instead of getting even. It is not satisfied with a walk of 1 mile

with a neighbor, it insists on going the second mile.

It gives to anyone who begs and offers love and prayer

to both enemies and persecutors.

***“What we dwell on in our minds will shape the way we live our lives,”***

***“What you set your mind on shapes your character and behavior.”***

Dwelling on ***“turning the other cheek”***

will shape your ability to forgive.

Focusing your thoughts on giving will enable you to be generous to others.

Opening your mind to the mind of Christ will give you  
the ability to love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.

As rays, our minds can be connected to Christ's mind.

And when we make this connection, then we can be

***the body of Christ in the world.***

Saint Teresa of Ávila, the great 16<sup>th</sup>-century mystic, said,

***Christ has no body but yours,  
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,  
Yours are the eyes with which He looks  
Compassion on this world,  
Yours are the feet with which He walks to do good,  
Yours are the hands, with which He blesses all the world.***

Teresa knew that followers of Christ

are the physical presence of Jesus in the world today.

As rays of Jesus, we are the ones who cook hot meals  
for low-income neighbors.

We are the ones who build affordable housing  
through Habitat for Humanity.

We are the ones who sit with a grieving neighbor,  
care for a vulnerable child, mentor a struggling teenager,  
or teach English to a group of immigrants.

***Christ has no body but ours.***



And finally, if we are going to be rays of Jesus,

***we need to maintain our connection with Christ.***

Remember that starfish aren't ***that*** distantly related to humans,  
sharing an ancestor 600 million years ago.

In the same way, we aren't that distantly related to Jesus,  
the only Son of God.

We maintain our connection with him through small group Bible study,  
EFM, times of silence and daily prayer, and regular worship —  
even in the summer.

Independence Day is the summer holiday  
commemorating the birth of our nation  
and the ideas on which it was founded.

When our country was just a newborn in 1776,  
Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson and John Adams  
were appointed to a committee  
tasked with designing the Great Seal of the United States.

Nearly 6 years passed, with two more committees chiming in  
and multiple design concepts.

When the final design was adopted in 1782,  
one element from the founding fathers remained:

the words *E pluribus unum* — Latin for “***Out of many, one.***”

The phrase works well for our country,

and the reverse could work well for the church: “***Out of one, many.***”

We have one Lord, the head of the church.

And out of this one head are many rays,

doing the work of Christ in the world.

It all starts with Starfish Jesus. Amen.

### **Sources:**

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