

## Vanessa Woods - Pentecost Reflection - May 24, 2026 - Trinity Episcopal Church

Good morning, first I want to thank Elizabeth and Sarah for having me up here to talk to you a bit about how we celebrate Pentecost in the church school so that you are ready to do the same thing in church today. Before we get to that though I have to set some context for us.

First , who am I? My name is Vanessa Woods and I've been involved in children's ministry here at Trinity for 20 years. I am also a professor at UC Santa Barbara.

Second, what is Pentecost? We all know that Christmas celebrates the birth of Jesus and Easter celebrates the resurrection but what is this church holiday for? Pentecost is a celebration of the Holy Spirit, and is when we celebrate people going out into the world to do good things in the name of Jesus. So we just heard the story. Jesus's disciples are sad after he is gone and they are scared and they are gathering for a holiday together. Then the Holy Spirit is there in a rush of wind and as flames above their heads bestowing the gift to communicate with others.

I was thinking about talking to you all about this story and I was thinking it really is a miraculous story. At first I was having trouble articulating how I was feeling about the story. Did something like this really happen or is it truly just a metaphorical story? When we talk to the kids about reading the bible we have a phrase that we use which is "something can be mythically true without being literally true" and I found this helped me not worry so much about it being real or not. But it still got me thinking –are miracles a thing?

I was talking to my niece about it and we decided to reframe what a miracle is, because maybe you also aren't sure how to deal with the idea of miracles. So what my niece and I came up with is to reframe a miracle to something good you couldn't imagine happening that then did happen.

Now I don't know about you but my typical coping mechanism is to have a plan for every contingency and so to be open to having something good I can't imagine happen feels dangerous to me, but maybe I am missing something important. I have a story to illustrate this—we had a close family member get swindled out of their retirement, all of it. This was devastating both practically and mentally for them, and they moved in with us out of necessity. When this happened if you would have asked me what would be the long term outcome of this 3 years later I would have said some pretty bleak things. Instead something good happened that I could not have imagined. After being with us for 2 years, getting a part time job, getting healthy and getting back on their feet they re-connected with an old flame who had recently decided to date. Now they are happily married at 72! This is a miraculous thing because I don't think any of us imagined this was a potential outcome. I am so grateful, but it also was humbling to me and a reminder to be more open to miracles.

One thing we try to do at this sermon is to give you a sense of what the kids are like when we are together in the church school, and I can say that they are much more open to the miraculous than I am which is refreshing. I think on this day when we are going to experience a Pentecost celebration using the traditions and curriculum we use with the kids in the church school, being open to miracles is a good start. Let's try to be open to the miracle of sometimes good things can unexpectedly be more than we imagine.

In the church school we run a curriculum called Catechesis of the Good Shepherd which is inspired by Montessori practices and is offering developmentally appropriate ways for children to discover their inner spirituality. I could say so much more about the beauty of this program, but we have candles to light and people to baptize so I'll just say please come and ask me or any other catechists about it and we would love to tell you more.

Ok so what are we all going to be doing in our Catechesis of the Good Shepherd celebration of Pentecost? We will be focusing on the gifts of the Spirit.

So in this presentation we will be choosing gifts, but before I explain logistics and have the children read their explanations of the Gifts of the Spirit I have one more thing to have you consider. As I mentioned in my day job I study college student success. In my work I have become convinced that there are systemic barriers that disadvantage and make it hard for some people to reach their full potential while in college. For example our low income students often face challenges that other students may not have to face. Unfortunately in the research world I live in this reality is often described with a deficit frame– it is framed as what are students missing? And how can we fix it? I am part of a group of scholars trying to flip this narrative to consider strengths and re frame thinking about students in an asset based way. What unique strengths are being brought into this context because we are including everyone? I see a parallel for this asset based framing for all of us when we do the candle lighting part of this ceremony.

Next I will have the kids read the gifts of the spirit that they wrote, and light each big red candle in the front of the church as the gift is read. You can follow along in your bulletin as well.

As the children read the gifts and light these candles, think about which gift you want to claim. Yes you get to pick a gift!

To pick your gift you will process up to the front communion style, released row by row by ushers, and you will be given a white taper candle. You will then walk up and light your small taper from the big red candle that represents the gift you want to claim. After you light your white taper you will hand your candle to the acolyte who will then place it in these containers around the altar.

So here is the thing that is a parallel to an asset based frame for students, and that is to challenge yourself –to claim a gift from a strengths and assets based mindset. Ignore that voice that says what you aren't and what you need to add to be better. Instead claim what your strength is. If we do this while open to miraculous good things there are endless possibilities to what your gift can wield in this world.

So now considering miracles, and claiming strengths let's hear what the kids have to say about the gifts of the spirit.

### **Wisdom**

Wisdom is about gaining the power and knowledge to make good decisions. It involves discerning your purpose which can be a map to guide you in your choices.

### **Knowledge**

Knowledge is the truth from your heart, and what you know is right. Spiritual knowledge is being in connection with God.

### **Counsel**

Counsel is when you help people understand and learn. A counselor is a trusted person to give you a safe place to talk about your feelings that is without judgment, and you feel acceptance. We think Jesus is the ultimate counselor.

### **Understanding**

Understanding is related to compassion and empathy, and the ability to accept others who are different. Part of understanding is to think about God's plan for you and others, and since this is hard to figure out part of it is to risk having faith in God's plan. One way to gain understanding is to go to church because it helps us have faith and connects us with others.

### **Delight**

We notice delight has the word light in it so it is living in God's light and is happiness and excitement. Delight involves others and we noticed that when we are generous the delight goes both ways for both the receiver and the giver. We feel delight in church when we are singing and when we listen to the organ and piano.

## **Awe**

The feeling of awe can be the amazement and surprise watching something cool, and has aspects of respect, fear, and wonder in it. We feel awe in big spaces or in ways we realize we are small in comparison. We also feel awe when we are inspired by other people and by ourselves when we are accomplished.

## **Power**

Everything and every person has power and we wanted to talk about both good and bad power. Bad power is to use power to hurt and kill others. Ignorance is another way that power can be bad if the person doesn't know all the information to make the wise choice. Good power is using power to stand up for yourself, for others, and for nature to protect it. We defined good power as using all of the gifts above to bring about positive things in the world.