Years ago, the writer David Foster Wallace gave a commencement speech at Kenyon College that people still talk about. He opened with a little story. Two young fish are swimming along when an older fish passes them going the other way. He nods and says, "Morning, boys. How's the water?" The young fish swim on for a bit, and then one turns to the other and says, "What the heck is water?"

It's a funny story, but Wallace was making a serious point. The things that shape us most are the things we're surrounded by, so we never notice them. We all swim in water. It's made of assumptions about what makes a life good, what success looks like, what being safe means, and what counts as normal. We soak them up from our families, our culture, our politics, even our churches. And we never call them assumptions. We just call them "the way things are."

I think that's what is happening in today's Gospel. Jesus doesn't give the crowd another lecture. He says, "Take something out of your pocket and look at it."

To see why, we have to remember the world Jesus lived in. Caesar Augustus had ended decades of civil war, and the empire celebrated him as the bringer of peace. He was called savior. He was called divine. And when his victories were announced across the empire, the word used was *euangelion*: good news. Gospel. Picture a town crier in the square: "Hear the good news of Caesar!" Then comes the list. Enemies crushed. Armies defeated. Peoples brought to heel. That was the good news. Peace through force. Safety through domination.

Now listen to how Mark begins his Gospel: "The beginning of the *euangelion* of Jesus Christ." Imagine how that sounded. The first Christians were saying that Caesar was not the savior, that Rome did not get the last word, and that there was another good news and another source of hope.

That's the setting when the Pharisees and Herodians try to trap Jesus with a question: should we pay taxes to Caesar? Say yes, and he loses the people who resent Rome. Say no, and he's guilty of rebellion.

Jesus doesn't take the bait. He says, "Show me the coin." Notice that he doesn't have one. They do. They pull out a denarius stamped with the emperor's face and a title claiming he's a god. That coin was a tiny piece of Roman theology, and they're carrying it in their pockets.

"Whose image is this? Whose title?" Then comes the line we all know: "Give to the emperor what is the emperor's, and to God what is God's."

I don't think this is mainly about taxes or about church and state. I think Jesus is asking, *What have you been carrying around without ever questioning it? What water are you swimming in?*

Rome taught people that peace comes from strength, that safety comes from control, and that more is always better. After a few generations nobody argued with it, because it was just life. So what's the Caesar in our pockets?

Let's be honest. We carry plenty of coins.

There's the one that says you are what you produce. So we end a Tuesday feeling like a failure because the to-do list won, and we measure our worth by an inbox that never empties.

There's the one that says enough is always just out of reach. So we lie awake at 2 a.m. running the numbers, wondering if we'll ever be okay.

There's the one that says rest is laziness. So we're exhausted, and we answer emails at the kitchen table and tell ourselves we just need to try harder. We call it being busy, but a lot of the time it's burnout.

And there's the one that says the people who disagree with us are the enemy, that compromise is weakness, and that winning is everything. So we dread Thanksgiving dinner conversations. We rehearse arguments in the shower. We scroll our phones at night, seething and judgmental, and wonder why we feel so tired and so alone.

This is why we need the Good News of Jesus Christ: to help us imagine a different kind of world. And hear this, because I think it matters: faith is, at least in part, a redeemed imagination. Worry, anxiety, these are symptoms of the imaginatiuon in distress. A good thing grown rotten. A redeemed imagination is hopeful, it has vision. It’s audacious and wily. It's the ability to see past the gridlock we're in and picture a better way forward.

Faith has to dream a little. Yes, it needs its feet on the ground, practical and rooted. But it also needs its head in the clouds sometimes, we have to be a little daring and willing to take some risks. Look at what Jesus asks us to imagine: the last will be first. The poor are blessed. Love your enemies. Forgiveness is stronger than revenge. The greatest among us is the servant of all. These aren't tips for being a nicer person. They're an invitation to a imagine a different world, a completely different way of being human and being in community.

That may be the greatest gift of faith. It frees us to imagine that the world as it is, is not the world as it has to be. The things we've written off as just how life works are not set in stone. God's possibilities are bigger than our imaginations. That is good news.

Which brings us back to the coin. Whose image is on it? Caesar's. So give Caesar what's Caesar's. But what carries the image of God? We do. All the way back in Genesis, we're told that humanity is made in God's image.

So here's my invitation this week: dream a little. Picture your life with less anxiety in it. Not a life without problems, but one where fear isn't making your decisions. What would you say yes to? What would you finally put down?

Now picture this community. A place where compassion matters more than competition. Where we give more than we hoard. Where we'd rather be reconciled than be right. Where we have enough, and we are enough.

Now picture the people you meet this week as bearing the image of God. The stranger in the checkout line. The neighbor with the yard sign you can't stand. The person you've been dodging for years.

Don't just think about it. See it. Let yourself hope.

Then start living as if it's true. Christian hope isn't wishful thinking, and faith isn't an escape from the world. A redeemed imagination shows us what could be, and then it sends us out the door to do the work God has given us.

So forgive someone. Give something away. Have the hard conversation. Be kind where nobody expects it. Little by little, with God's help, we become part of the future we dared to imagine.

Amen.