

Homily for Thomas à Kempis, Priest, July 25, 1471

July 24, 2020

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Philippians 4:4–9, Psalm 34:1–8, Luke 6:17–23

Rabbi Edwin Friedman, a Bowen Family Systems therapist, when he died in October 1996, had what would be his book almost ready for publication. It was published three years later. The title was *Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix*.¹ Many Episcopal priests and bishops had studied under Ed. Church Publishing put out a polished, professional edition in 2007. For those of us who studied with Ed, we had heard his first chapter as a lecture.

It was called “Imaginative Gridlock and the Spirit of Adventure.” At the top of the first page of the chapter are these words, “The safest place for ships is in the harbor, but that’s not why ships were built”—quotation’s author unknown.² He begins with remarks about the *Nuremberg Chronicle* of 1493. It describes one of Europe’s greatest cities as “depressed.” There was a plague, but the fall of Constantinople in 1453 had disrupted a crucial East-West trade route.

¹ Edwin H. Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix*, eds. Margaret Treadwell and Edward Beal (New York: Church Publishing, 2007).

² *Ibid.*, 29.

Ed directs his readers' attention to what else was going on. The Portuguese were sailing down the coast of the west coast of Africa. The Portuguese reached the Cape of Good Hope in 1488. Columbus reached the New World in 1492. Vasco de Gama reached India in 1498. The world was connected in a new way.

Friedman observed that, in contrast to the Nuremberg Chronicle, "A person born in 1492 could have witnessed in their lifetime: an extraordinary flowering of artistic imagination concerning form and perspective in painting, sculpture, literature, architecture; the reformation led by Luther and Calvin . . . the invention of the watch . . . the invention of the first newspaper."³

But great things were happening elsewhere in Europe. It was not just the discovery of new trade routes to the east, but the work of Thomas Hemerken, who was born in Kempen, now in the Netherlands, in 1379 or 1380. He died on the twenty-fifth day of July in 1471. The Protestant Reformation was on the horizon; his work would help shape its direction.

³ Ibid., 30.

Thomas died not today, on July 24, 1471, but on July 25 of that year. But July 25 is the feast of Saint James the Apostle. So, Thomas à—French for “from”—Kempis is commemorated a day earlier.

While preparing for today, I found a recent article about Thomas: “Turn Away the World: How a Curious Fifteenth-Century Spiritual Guidebook Shaped the Contours of the Reformation and Taught Readers to Turn Inward.”⁴ R. Jay Magill notes as he begins, “With the exception of the Bible, no other book would be translated into more languages or be read by more people—certainly by more Christians. That book is called *De Imitatione Christi*—in English, *The Imitation of Christ*—and never once in nearly six centuries has it been out of print.”⁵

He and his older brother John received an excellent Latin education. Thomas was a gifted scribe, noted for his “elegant penmanship.”⁶ He followed John into a community called the Brethren of the Common Life. Concerned primarily with Scripture, this was a reform movement within the Church. Magill says, “in many

⁴ R. Jay Magill, Jr., “Turn Away the World: How a Curious Fifteenth-Century Spiritual Guidebook Shaped the Contours of the Reformation and Taught Readers to Turn Inward,” *Christianity & Literature* 67 (2017, 34-49).

⁵ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 36.

ways [it] resembled the centuries-earlier Franciscan embrace of evangelical poverty.”⁷ They lived together simply but took no vows. They worshiped in parish churches and worked in the world.

He also writes, surprising me, that a “2015 article in the *Economic Journal* establishes a solid link between the Brethren’s social and economic activity and the Netherlands’ distinctly precocious economic development, literacy, book production, and corresponding capital accumulation.⁸ The Brothers of the Common Life, it turns out, helped to jumpstart capitalism in Europe.”⁹

I leave with two quotations from *The Imitation of Christ*:

Book One/Chapter 23: Strive now so to live, that you may be able in the hour of death to rejoice rather than to fear.

Book One/Chapter 22: Why do you wish to put off your good purpose? Arise, and begin at once, and say,

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Cited by Magill, 37. Semih Akcomak, Dinand Webbink, and Bas ter Weel, “Why Did the Netherlands Develop So Early? The Legacy of the Brethren of the Common Life,” *Economic Journal* 126.593 (June 2016): 821-860.

⁹ Magill, 37.

“Now is the time for action, now is the time for effort,
now is the fit time for amendment.”¹⁰

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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¹⁰ <https://www.theimitationofchrist.com/thomas-a-kempis/>, (accessed 24 July 2020).