In the name of the Father and of the † Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My opening text for this sermon speaks of our Lord’s defense of the stranger speaking in his name—in the name of Jesus. The words go this way:

John said to him, “Teacher, we saw a man casting out demons in your name, and we forbade him, because he was not following us.” 39But Jesus said, “Do not forbid him... (Mark 9:38-39, RSV)

Earlier this week, in our Monday evening class studying Martin Luther’s Large Catechism, I mentioned that I wish that Pope Leo X and his theological advisors had taken such a charitable stance toward Martin Luther as Jesus takes toward this stranger. By 1520 it was pretty clear that Martin Luther was walking his own path, even that he was unwilling to submit to the Pope in certain matters about which Luther felt the Bible had the final say. Instead of excommunicating Luther, I wish that Pope Leo had simply sighed and said to himself and to his advisors, “Well, this Martin Luther is a stubborn fellow, but he is speaking in the name of Jesus and in many respects he is doing a good job. He has challenged my papal authority and I am disappointed by that, but all things considered I do not want to forbid him to be a teacher in the church. He is not following us as obediently as I would wish, but I do not mean to forbid him or to cast him out of the church.”

And so, from this distance, I wish that Pope Leo had taken a more charitable stance toward Luther, as Jesus took toward the one John wanted to forbid. Of course, I do not know all of the pressures upon Pope Leo, nor do I know the complexities of the situation as well as he did. Still, I wish that Pope Leo had followed the example of Jesus in this morning’s gospel story and said, “Do not forbid him.”

I wish this because the results of Luther’s excommunication have been awful. The Reformation is not to be regretted, but the division of the church is. Christ’s Church on earth has been fractured, and that is clearly against the will of Jesus who prayed that his church should be one (John 17). The fracturing of the church led to the Thirty Years War (1618-48), which has been called “one of the most destructive conflicts in human history”1. It led to a loss of confidence in the teaching office of the church since the teaching of

1 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thirty_Years%27_War
the church was now officially in conflict. It yielded centuries of indifference, and sometimes hostility, between Catholics and Lutherans. I cannot help but think that our world is a poorer place because Pope Leo X could not bring himself to say, “Do not forbid him. Do not forbid Luther.” And, I guess, of course I would say that, stubborn Lutheran that I am.

Well, let us return to our gospel story. John has forbidden a stranger to speak in the name of Jesus because, as John puts it, “he was not following us.” This fellow is a stranger to John and the rest of the twelve. He was a stranger to them but I am not so sure that he was a stranger to Jesus. Do you remember the story of the disciple Philip calling the disciple Nathanael? When Philip brings Nathanael to Jesus, Jesus says:

“Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile!” (John 1:47, RSV)

To this, Nathanael replies and Jesus answers:

Nathanael said to him, “How do you know me?” Jesus answered him, “Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you. (John 1:48, RSV)

Likewise, John might not have known the stranger in this morning’s Gospel story, but Jesus might have known him. Jesus might have seen him even when he was far off. Jesus might well have known that he did not want to forbid this fellow from speaking in his name.

Let us imagine this man. Let us seek a charitable interpretation of this fellow John wants to forbid.

The first thing we might notice about this man is something a bit awkward for the twelve disciples. It seems that this man is able to do something that the disciples themselves had been unable to do, just recently. Take a look at our painting of the Transfiguration of our Lord above the altarpiece here at Immanuel Lutheran Church. Do you recall the scene right after Jesus descends from the holy mountain? It is a scene of failure. When Jesus, Peter, James, and John come down from the mountain they come upon a heartbreaking scene. The disciples have been unable to cast a demon out of a sick child. Let me read the short passage for you:

17And one of the crowd answered him, “Teacher, I brought my son to you, for he has a dumb spirit; 18and wherever it seizes him, it dashes him down; and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid; and I asked your disciples to cast it out, and they were not able.” (Mark 9:17-18, RSV)
I am a father. Many of you are parents. Imagine how sad we would be if one of our children was suffering as this child was suffering. So the father brings his child to the disciples in confidence that they can heal the boy, but they cannot. Glad to say, Jesus can and does heal the boy, and he explains to the disciples afterwards that this particular demon was a hard demon to get rid of. And so Jesus says to the disciples:

   This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer.  
   (Mark 9:29, RSV)

I bet this is true in general for anyone who would like to do good deeds in the name of Jesus. The name of Jesus is not magic. To use the name of Jesus well requires a spirit of prayer. Indeed it requires something of the spirit of Jesus, of the Holy Spirit.

   There is a strange story in Acts Chapter 8. It concerns a miracle worker named Simon. Simon must have been an impressive man. He had quite a reputation. The Bible puts it this way:

   9But there was a man named Simon who had previously practiced magic in the city and amazed the nation of Samaria, saying that he himself was somebody great.  
   10They all gave heed to him, from the least to the greatest, saying, “This man is that power of God which is called Great.” (Acts 8:9-10, RSV)

It so happened that this Simon heard the preaching about Jesus, believed the preaching, and was baptized. But things soon turned bad for Simon because, though he had given himself to Jesus, he did not yet have the spirit of Jesus. He was still subject to a spirit of greed and desire for reputation. He noticed about the apostles Peter and John that when they baptized people, they gave the gift of the Holy Spirit. The rest of the story goes this way:

   18Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles’ hands, he offered them money, 19saying, “Give me also this power, that any one on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.” 20But Peter said to him, “Your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money! 21You have neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right before God. 22Repent therefore of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. (Acts 8:18-22, RSV)
If Peter and John could perceive that the heart of Simon was not yet right before God, then it is reasonable to think that Jesus can perceive the heart of this morning’s man casting out demons in his name. And so Jesus confidently says to the disciples, “Do not forbid him.”

There is a simple lesson for us to be learned from this story of Jesus’s protection of that stranger. It is a lesson you probably already believe: Let us have honor and affection for Christians in other parts of Christ’s Church. When you are on vacation, for example, try visiting another church. My family and I once visited a Baptist Church on Sunday morning and were much uplifted by the preaching and the singing. Likewise, yesterday I attended a memorial service for our member Mary Ellen David at a small United Methodist church in the colonial town Fallsington, PA. I thought it was great! Not all of our brothers and sisters in the Lord are Lutheran, but let us be happy to think that they might well be good Christians from whom we could learn much and whose prayers we could well covet.

So that is the first part of this morning’s gospel story—the part about Jesus defending the stranger doing good in his name.

Now let us turn to the part about the millstone. Our Lord says this:

> 42 Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung round his neck and he were thrown into the sea. (Mark 9:42, RSV)

I read an interesting commentary about this passage. One of the scholars wrote this:

> I have heard many sermons, but none on the warnings in this text (about the millstone). Mainline preachers are much more squeamish when it comes to such texts than the people who warm the pews. Christians deserve to know what Jesus was talking about.²

For my part, I do not want to diminish or undo this text. And so I give my testimony: I believe our Lord’s teaching about the millstone. I do not know how to make what he says more clear. I believe in the fire that is not quenched and the worm that dieth not. I believe that pastors must not be casual about the souls of their people. They must not preach just any fool thing that comes into their heads, but must preach the Word of God. They

must not cause any of Christ’s little ones to sin. They must not abuse the little ones. They must not mislead their people, no matter how popular the trends. I have prayed about this for myself, not wanting to mislead our people. We preachers must preach the Biblical faith of the church, because one day we are going to stand before the Judgment Seat of the One who has entrusted the office of pastor to us and who has given us fair warning of the millstone. Surely, even the most saintly of pastors has no hope in that day except in the mercy of Jesus. But that mercy must not obscure for us how earnest Jesus is about hurting or misleading the little ones who believe in him. God save us from this! In the name of Jesus. Amen.