

A Contract Written with Words of Love  
Sermon for the 13<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity  
Sermon Text: Leviticus 19:1-3,13-18, 33-34

*And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, <sup>2</sup>“Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them, You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy. <sup>3</sup>Every one of you shall revere his mother and his father, and you shall keep my Sabbaths: I am the LORD your God... <sup>13</sup>“You shall not oppress your neighbor or rob him. The wages of a hired worker shall not remain with you all night until the morning. <sup>14</sup>You shall not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind, but you shall fear your God: I am the LORD. <sup>15</sup>“You shall do no injustice in court. You shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great, but in righteousness shall you judge your neighbor. <sup>16</sup>You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not stand up against the life of your neighbor: I am the LORD. <sup>17</sup>“You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason frankly with your neighbor, lest you incur sin because of him. <sup>18</sup>You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD... <sup>33</sup>“When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. <sup>34</sup>You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.*

Back when Moses first raised his voice and called the people of Israel to go into the desert, the people felt on the one hand excited and on the other hand frightened of this calling. It was clear that the people of Israel could no longer live in Egypt, the pharaoh clearly intended to destroy the people, for example by ordering midwives to kill all baby boys born to Hebrew women and no one could do anything against it. But to go into the desert, that also didn't seem like a good idea! Especially if the Pharaoh was determined to prevent that plan at all costs with help from the Egyptian army. Besides, the Red Sea stood before them as an insurmountable barrier. Israel truly found themselves caught between a rock and a hard place in this situation – Pharaoh on the one side and the barren desert on the other with the Red Sea in the middle. But God commanded them and Israel experienced a miracle. They went through the Red Sea and were saved in a miraculous way. Now they were alone, alone with God! And the question was, how would life go on now with God? And what would life with God actually look like? Because one thing was now clear, Pharaoh was gone, Egypt was gone. Now only God remained and only God could help them in the desert. It was precisely in this situation that Moses called the people together to tell them how life would continue from here on out. Moses explained that God wanted to make a kind of marriage contract with the people. The contract was based on a very simple sentence: “*You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.*” This image of God's people in the desert entering into a marriage contract with God is at the same time an image of the whole people of God, including the people of God in the New Testament.

In the New Testament, Jesus appeared on a mountain in the desert, similarly to Moses, and began to preach. Summarizing His sermon, Jesus then quoted Moses almost word for word when He said: “*You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect*” (Matt. 5:48). For the people in the Old Testament as well as for those in the New Testament, it's all about the same God. And when we go with this God and are with Him, then something from the Holy God should overflow into us, just as Jesus says: “*You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*” Peter's epistle picks up the same Biblical point from the Old Testament and now establishes *in Christ* the covenant that Moses established with the Israelites by saying: “*you were ransomed...not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ*” (1 Peter 1:18-19). And Peter's epistle places these words from Leviticus in the context of salvation in Christ: “*You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.*” What Peter writes in his epistle is exactly what is meant in the Old Testament. Because we are born again in Christ and bought by God, we now are turned to face Him, and this encompasses our entire life. I know that throughout history there have been repeated attempts by the state to regulate Christian life and to force it on people. This was especially the case in the Reformed Church. Of

course, no one can force another person to believe or to live according to the 10 Commandments. Yet you can also go to the other extreme and relegate the Christian faith to the empty pews on Sunday so that it no longer has anything to do with everyday life. There is the danger that we call ourselves Christian and yet in our lives, turn away from God. This usually doesn't happen all at once, but in small increments that happen in everyday life. The promise given to us at Baptism remains forever and can never be taken away. Yet it is not a given that we will always remain in this Baptismal grace. It can be that we fall away from our faith. It can be that we hide the Baptismal grace that we have received under a basket. The parable of the 10 virgins explains all of this with one picture. Only half of the virgins had oil in their lamps at the end of the parable. Even here in central Germany, once the cradle of Lutheranism, we see very clearly how many people no longer believe in Jesus Christ anymore. Even from among our own acquaintances, our families, and our friends, not many believe in Jesus anymore. There's a brother, a son, a father, a friend... who doesn't think much of the church anymore, who thinks that the church is no longer relevant or modern or that the church is naive. And he also has his difficulties with the topic of God. "Is there even a God? Why doesn't He care?" So many questions. But this 'becoming weak in faith' is something we even feel ourselves in our own lives. We don't always understand how God deals with us. We don't always have joy in the message of the Gospel. We also no longer have time in our lives to pray or to let God's Word speak to us. We don't always know that God holds us in His hand and carries us through all troubles. Fatigue has set in for some of us – "what do I actually get out of becoming a Christian?" The Old Testament story explains to us how life with God can be understood in very practical terms.

And Moses called the entire people together and said: "*You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.*" God made a marriage contract with the people and the marriage contract was the plan. The plan hides in the word "holy." The word "holy" can be translated as being intended only for God's purpose and nothing else. The utensils, for example, that were used in the Temple were no different from the other utensils that the Israelites used for cooking. But because they were intended to be used *only* in the Temple, they were holy. And in this same way, the people of Israel should be holy. They should be turned towards God and turn away from their old ways of life in Egypt. Then came a plan showing how the life of the Israelites should look different. The 10 Commandments are there in the center as a measuring stick. The Israelites' lives are turned towards God, and they should live from God. And this life with God should encompass all areas of daily life: family, parents, job, even your time. Because God said: "*You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.*" Israel had turned toward God in the desert and now the people were to live from the Spirit of this God. From now on, God should determine their whole life. God's voice rings out from the burning Mount Sinai and this voice should pierce the being of the people and each individual person. In the center of this new path is love – love towards God and love towards our neighbors. As we have learned from the history of God's people, love for God and for our neighbor has been violated in cruel ways. This violation of the contract reaches its high point on the mountain of Golgotha, where God Himself is crucified. That was the absolute worst disrespect for the Living God and the worst violation of the dignity of our God. Yet on Golgotha, the contractual words are carved in stone, and they alone have endured. A contract must always be between two parties. In the old covenant, the agreement was between the people and God. The agreement between the Israelites and God was constantly broken. In the new covenant, the agreement between Jesus and God is firm and cannot be broken. But Jesus isn't there for Himself, He's there for us. With His blood, Jesus made a contract that is absolute and final for us and that's why He said, "It is finished." Final and conclusive. Under the shadows of Jesus' wings, I can be what God already wanted from me. I can be holy, because He is holy. I can believe in God because His faith is strong. Here I stand before God with my whole being. The people of Israel had to face insurmountable obstacles back then, and so do I. Instead of Pharaoh and his soldiers, Satan is there, and he wants to get closer to me and wants to tear me away from God. In between is the water of Baptism, which drowned Satan and his entire army. And before me stands Jesus, and Jesus alone. Amen.