

This is a requirement of the law that the LORD has commanded: Tell the Israelites to bring you a red heifer without defect or blemish and that has never been under a yoke. ³ Give it to Eleazar the priest; it is to be taken outside the camp and slaughtered in his presence. ⁴ Then Eleazar the priest is to take some of its blood on his finger and sprinkle it seven times toward the front of the Tent of Meeting. ⁵ While he watches, the heifer is to be burned—its hide, flesh, blood and offal. ⁶ The priest is to take some cedar wood, hyssop and scarlet wool and throw them onto the burning heifer. ... ⁹ “A man who is clean shall gather up the ashes of the heifer and put them in a ceremonially clean place outside the camp. They shall be kept by the Israelite community for use in the water of cleansing; it is for purification from sin. ¹⁰ The man who gathers up the ashes of the heifer must also wash his clothes, and he too will be unclean till evening. This will be a lasting ordinance both for the Israelites and for the aliens living among them.

¹¹ “Whoever touches the dead body of anyone will be unclean for seven days. ¹² He must purify himself with the water on the third day and on the seventh day; then he will be clean. But if he does not purify himself on the third and seventh days, he will not be clean. ¹³ Whoever touches the dead body of anyone and fails to purify himself defiles the LORD’s tabernacle. That person must be cut off from Israel. Because the water of cleansing has not been sprinkled on him, he is unclean; his uncleanness remains on him.

¹⁴ “This is the law that applies when a person dies in a tent: Anyone who enters the tent and anyone who is in it will be unclean for seven days, ¹⁵ and every open container without a lid fastened on it will be unclean.

¹⁶ “Anyone out in the open who touches someone who has been killed with a sword or someone who has died a natural death, or anyone who touches a human bone or a grave, will be unclean for seven days.

... ²⁰ But if a person who is unclean does not purify himself, he must be cut off from the community, because he has defiled the sanctuary of the LORD. The water of cleansing has not been sprinkled on him, and he is unclean. (Numbers 19:2-6, 9-16, 20)

We See Jesus Making Us Clean

Our church’s seminary doesn’t have married student housing. When students get married, they have to find housing. When I was a student, there was an apartment that was passed down from student to student over a number of years. It was located above a funeral home. The rent was cheap, because the owner expected the student and his wife to watch over things after hours. Sometimes when friends dropped by to watch a movie or a football game, someone would ask, “Is there anybody downstairs?” They weren’t asking about the funeral home staff. If the answer was yes, invariably those friends wanted to take a peek. For most of them, the trip downstairs represented their first up-close encounter with a dead body. Sometimes they were tempted to touch it. If they did, when they got back upstairs, most of them washed their hands.

Why do you suppose they did that? The quick answer would be “germs.” Our society is very sensitive to hygiene. But that’s a fairly recent development. When the transcontinental railroad was first completed, people used to say that you could travel from New York to San Francisco in a week—so quickly that you wouldn’t even need to take a bath. We’ve come a long way in 150 years. But tonight we’re reading from the book of Numbers, written by Moses about 3,500 years ago. Here Moses talks about washing after touching a dead body. He wasn’t worried about germs. God’s Old Testament laws and ceremonies served as prophecies of the Savior. Tonight, in the water of cleansing, **we see Jesus making us clean.**

I.

If you had crept downstairs in that funeral home, would you have touched a dead body? If you did, would you have washed your hands? What if you went to a funeral visitation? What if you were in the hospital when someone died? What if you stopped by the cemetery on your grandmother’s birthday and put flowers on her grave? Moses writes: **“Whoever touches the dead body of anyone will be unclean for seven days. He must purify himself with the water on the third day and on the seventh day; then he will be clean. But if he does not purify himself on the third and seventh days, he will not be clean.”** If someone died in a Hebrew home, that home was unclean and had to be purified. If an Israelite touched a bone or even a grave, he or she was unclean. This law had nothing to do with germs. It was about God and his reaction to sin. When God created Adam and Eve, he created them to live forever. If they had obeyed him, they would still be alive today

and we would expect to live forever with them. But Adam and Eve did not obey God. They turned from him in their hearts, reached out with their hands, and sinned. God then pronounced on them the curse of death that still hangs over our heads today. Death is not a natural part of the cycle of life. It's a horrible contamination of God's creation. And it comes from sin.

So to prepare his Old Testament people to receive their Savior, God built into the Mt Sinai covenant the idea that sin separates us from him. Death proves that we all are sinners, so death produces the most intense ceremonial uncleanness found in the Old Covenant. Even Grandma's grave made a Jewish person unclean. And if you're unclean, you dare not enter into God's presence. Moses says, **"Whoever touches the dead body of anyone and fails to purify himself defiles the Lord's tabernacle."** God conditioned the consciences of his people to be extremely sensitive to this issue, so that they would understand that they had to get rid of the contamination of death. And so do we.

Now God has not commanded us today to observe this ritual. But our sin does raise a stench to God that would turn his stomach, if God had a stomach. We need Jesus to wash away the stench of death from us, regardless of whether we've ever touched a dead body or not. No matter how healthy you may feel today, sooner or later your body will be crushed in a car accident or cancer will consume your organs or old age will wear you down until your brain and your heart stop working. Unless Jesus returns first, we are all going to die because we have all inherited the birth defect of sin. That birth defect is more than just a weakness that we can overcome. It ruins all that we are. It makes it impossible for us to do anything good in God's eyes. By nature we can only sin and die.

The heart of God's law is simple: **"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength."** It isn't "help the poor." It isn't "visit the sick." It isn't "promote racial healing." God's law says, "Love me with all of your being." If we did love God totally and absolutely, he would never have to tell us to visit the sick or help the poor or treat all people of all races with Christian love and respect. We would just do those things because we would understand that that's how God wants us to live. Anything less than perfect love for God is sin. We sinners die because our love stinks.

But God gets rid of our death. He washes it away. We take a bath in Jesus. In Jesus, who inherited no sin. In Jesus, who did love God perfectly and who loved all people in the way we never will. In Jesus, who laid down his life to pay for our sins. His life, his death, his resurrection took away our death. They purified us before God. How did we take that bath in Jesus? In our Baptism. God poured more than just water on us when our pastors baptized us. He poured the Word; he poured the gospel on us. He poured the life and death and resurrection of Christ on us. That made us clean. That's what Moses shows us this evening. **We see Jesus making us clean from the stench of death.**

II.

Having said all that, we still have to admit that God devised a pretty strange ritual to teach this truth to the Israelites. Jewish tradition says that King Solomon could explain almost all the laws of Moses, but this one had him stumped. I don't know if that's true or not, but the key to understanding this rite is realizing that it's a picture of Jesus. God doesn't intend us to interpret every detail. But taken as a whole, this rite shows us a shadow of Christ.

Numbers chapter 19 calls for a red heifer. A heifer is a young female cow. The heifer was to be physically perfect—unblemished—and red. The rabbis have always understood this to mean totally red. Orthodox Jews believe that today all Jews are unclean. They've all been in contact with a body or a grave or with someone who's been in contact with a body. This means they can't resume temple worship until they can make the water of cleansing. They can't do that until they have a red heifer. Several years ago there was real excitement in Israel because a red calf had been born to a Jewish family for the first time in centuries. But within a few weeks, spots began to appear in the coat of the calf. A truly red heifer is a rare commodity.

Once there was an acceptable animal, it had to be slaughtered outside the camp in the presence of a priest. Jewish tradition says that the Jews did this on the Mount of Olives—near the place where Jesus was arrested. The priest dipped his finger in the heifer's blood and sprinkled it seven times in the direction of the tabernacle. Then the heifer was burned to ash. Hyssop and cedar and scarlet wool were also thrown into the fire, but the majority of what was in the fire was the heifer. Depending on the breed, a heifer can weigh from 400 to 700 pounds. How many hours do you suppose it took for it to be burned to ash? How much ash do you think

you would get from an animal that large? Jewish tradition says that the burning of a red heifer was only carried out eight times in all of Jewish history. When the temple was finally destroyed 70 years after Jesus was born, there were still enough heifer ashes left over to continue making the water of cleansing for another three hundred years.

What was all that ash for? If a person was unclean due to contact with a dead body, on the third and seventh days the ash was mixed with fresh water and then sprinkled over the person. It wasn't a bath or even a shower. It was a ritual. So what was God pointing to? Christ. The heifer was to be physically flawless because Jesus is sinless. The animal is extremely rare because there will never be another man like Jesus. But most important of all, the red heifer was to give her life to cleanse God's people from the uncleanness of death because Jesus paid for our sins with his life. God's law demands that everyone who fails to love him perfectly should die and then go to hell. But God's love also demands that he do everything possible to keep us out of hell. So God the Son entered our sinful and tortured world. He carried our sorrows and afflictions. On the cross Jesus passed through all the horrors of this life and through hell. Then he died. And then he rose to give us eternal life. When he comes back, we will live in a world without death, without pain or sorrow or sadness, without any threat that we will go to hell. That's what Christ's sacrifice means for us. It means that death has no hold on us anymore, even though we may still pass through it.

When the ashes of the heifer were mixed in water and sprinkled on people who stank of sin, the heifer's death washed away the people's uncleanness. This is a prophecy of the gospel. Jesus' death washes our uncleanness away when God sprinkles it on us. God sprinkles Jesus' death on us through the gospel in the preached and written Word and in the sacraments. You can't help but think of Baptism when you think of this sprinkling with water to wash sin away. We would never fully understand what Baptism does for us without these Old Testament washings. This is a prophecy of God coming to each of us individually, washing our stench away and making us smell like roses.

When you were baptized, God washed you personally. That washing is yours forever. In Baptism we are nailed to the cross. In Baptism we die when Jesus dies. In Baptism we pass through the grave and come out alive and holy on the other side. The end result is that our hearts are sprinkled—they don't stink of death and sin anymore. Baptism applies Jesus' cleansing and saving work to each of us personally. The message about Jesus enters our hearts, and the Holy Spirit plants faith there. Faith clings to what Christ has done and that makes us clean in God's eyes. Once God has shown you your Savior, you can't help but see what this Old Testament ceremony means. **We see Jesus making us clean by applying his death to us.**

Those seminary students probably should have stayed upstairs. But their curiosity gives us a handle on the rich picture that God gives us tonight. Centuries before Jesus made his last trip to Jerusalem, centuries before he offered his body to make us clean, God taught his people that sin makes all people stink of death. And he promised to provide a Savior who would die and wash the stench and sin away. Jesus did that for us. The gospel gives his death to us. Our baptisms take us to the cross and the empty tomb with Jesus. Now we will live and celebrate with him forever. Amen.