

“Recognizing the Value and Purpose of the Seemingly Insignificant”

2 Kings 5:1–14

Dr. Christopher C. F. Chapman

First Baptist Church, Raleigh

July 6, 2025

This week Dana and I were finally able to watch the miniseries “Shardlake” streaming on Hulu. It is a screen setting of C.J. Sansom’s novel *Dissolution*, one in a series of novels about a so-called hunchbacked lawyer (we would say he had kyphosis) during the reign of Henry VIII of England. Sansom, who sadly died last year at the age of seventy-one, had a PhD in history and worked early on as a lawyer for the disadvantaged. So, he had ample credentials for shaping stories about a man with a physical challenge who practiced law in the 1500s.

There are many things we love about the novels. The characters are interesting, the plots are fast-moving, and the historical details are consistent with good scholarship. But most importantly, the focus is on a character who is not a primary political figure. Usually everything is about the big names, the lead characters, in this time Henry VIII, of course, he is king, and Thomas Cromwell who oversees the dissolution of the monasteries. But in this novel and the miniseries, the focus is on Shardlake. Cromwell is only in two episodes and Henry is talked about but never seen. It’s refreshing to see people deemed insignificant and often demeaned recognized as having value and purpose.

It is a dynamic we also see at work in the story we have read from 2 Kings. It is a familiar story, and most of us recognize the major characters. We know Naaman, the commander of the army of Aram, and we know Elisha, the prophet of Israel. Then, we have two kings, neither of whom is named — the king of Aram, and the king of Israel who is probably Jehoram, son of Ahab. These are the kings, commander, and prophet involved, the lead characters, but they do not drive the narrative.

Naaman is sick, he has leprosy, and he is not very astute. He is told to wash in the Jordan and he will be well, but he refuses, saying he has better rivers back home. What is the Yarden River compared to the

Mighty Mississippi? Just a little creek! All the king of Aram does is send a letter with gifts to the king of Israel which he misinterprets as a threat. And while Elisha sends word for Naaman to wash in the Jordan, offering healing to this outsider and enemy, Elisha doesn't meet the commander in person. He is offstage, in the background, he appears in only one episode of the miniseries. God is responsible for the healing.

So, God is the character who moves the plot in this story, but who are the human instruments of God's providence? First of all, there is a young girl from Israel who has been taken captive by the Arameans. She now serves Naaman's wife. Learning about Naaman's leprosy, she is the one who tells her captors about a prophet in Samaria who could cure Naaman of leprosy. And then, there are Naaman's servants, who when he refuses to wash in the Jordan, say, "Father, if the prophet commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was, 'Wash, and be clean?'"

A young slave girl points Naaman in the direction of help, his servants convince him to do what Elisha tells him to do, and he ends up being healed. Then, just after our reading ends, he comes to believe in the power of God who restores his wellbeing. It is not the rich and powerful who are the true heroes in this story. It is the down and out, the lowly and despised, the seemingly insignificant. Such characters would be left out of most historical accounts, but the Bible includes them. The record of God's redemptive activity in the world underscores their contributions, their value and purpose, their role in God's design.

So, what is the message for us? In part, it is a reminder about the nature of history, the fact that significant events are shaped not simply by well-known figures with wealth and power but also by a host of others who play significant roles whether we know their names or not. This is worth remembering, especially at a time like this and during this week when we celebrate our national independence.

Never has there been more information available about our national history and never has there been more fundamental ignorance about it. There is so much misinformation driven by agenda and so little willingness to vet sources of information and read extensively that very

few people are well-informed. There are many wonderful books like David McCullough's *1776* and his biography of John Adams, both of which tell us plenty about key leaders but also the contributions of people like Abigail Adams. Gordon Wood's book *Friends Divided*, which explores the relationship of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson over time, sheds more light on these figures and others around them.

There are many good books and great research is ongoing. We keep up with a good bit of it through our membership in the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation. More and more attention is being given to lesser-known figures in the revolution, to the roles African-Americans, Indigenous Americans, and others played, and there are other centers of historical research. Accurate information is available, the stories of seemingly insignificant figures are being recovered, we just have to be willing to find them and tune out the misleading propaganda.

Just as Naaman would not be healed without the help of a captive slave girl and his servants, we would not be who we are today without the roles many behind-the-scenes people played in military service, political leadership, and advocacy for various principles, like our Baptist forbearers who were on the frontline fighting for religious liberty.

There is one footnote we need to add to this takeaway from our text. Just as events in history were shaped not simply by well-known figures with wealth and power but also by seemingly insignificant people, the same is true of current events which will one day be history.

We know who gets the headlines now, and I'm not just talking about one person. We know there are various people claiming to be working for what is best but in different ways, indeed, often claiming to represent God but in diametrically opposed ways. History will tell what the critical issues were and who was on the side of truth and right.

But there are also people all around us working for justice, fighting for freedom, trying to build bridges instead of walls, keeping the support systems of our nation going, caring for the poor and vulnerable, who no one knows by name. They are the true heroes of this time.

But there is another message in this story. Not only do we find a reminder that many lesser-known people help shape history; we receive

assurance that seemingly insignificant people have value and purpose, which means we all have value and purpose.

When thinking specifically about the church, the Apostle Paul uses the metaphor of the body to get at this sacred truth. No part of the body can decide that another part is not needed. We need eyes to see and ears to hear and the list goes on and on. In like manner, in the church we need people who can preach and sing and visit and serve in ministries and on mission trips, but we also need people to serve on various committees and guide decision making, people who can plan and serve meals, people who can clean up, and the list goes on and on.

Some roles are more visible and may seem more important, but every role matters, every person matters, each of us is created by God for a purpose. And some work that is vital is easily overlooked.

There are many laypeople in this church who perform these functions who I will not mention by name because I would inevitably leave someone out, but they know who they are. There are about ten people here, mostly women but not all of them, whose work will have to be replaced by at least 100 people one day. They do that much, and a great deal of it is behind the scenes.

It takes a lot of simple, tedious tasks to make a clothing ministry or White Flag Shelter work, to keep WMU and music and children's and youth programs going, to see that every family in grief is offered a meal at their time of loss. But all this work happens because of these people.

Louis Weeks, who was president of Union Theological Seminary in Richmond, Virginia when I did doctoral work there, called this scutwork. He wrote a book entitled *All for God's Glory: Redeeming God's Scutwork*. He lifted up people who do behind-the-scenes work that enables the church to live out its witness. Like the Israelite girl serving Naaman's wife and his servants, they move our story forward.

Mike Morris, who served on our ministerial staff for twenty-five years, did a lot of this work. I told him about Louis Weeks' book and his name for the work, and he identified with it. In fact, even though Mike tried to list all the tasks he performed before retiring, it took us five years after he retired to learn about everything he did, one task at a time, when it didn't get done. "Well, if you didn't lock up after that service,

who did?” we asked whomever, “If you didn’t turn out those lights, who did? If you didn’t pull back the curtains, and not the veil, in the baptistery, who did?” Inevitably, “Mike did,” was the answer. It needed to be done, so he did it — scutwork, for God’s glory.

Rodney does a lot of this work too, some of it in his job description, a lot of it not, like spending over an hour this week helping a young woman whose car had run out of gas beside our parking lot and then whose car wouldn’t start. A number of us helped in some way — I fashioned a make-do collar and leash for her sweet black lab — but Rodney stayed with her until he got the car started. He does this kind of thing all the time, you just don’t hear about it. All our staff members do, as do many of you. Is this insignificant work? Not in the eyes of God!

In his book *Maybe (Maybe Not)*, Robert Fulghum lists a series of contradictions, including: look before you leap/ he who hesitates is lost; two heads are better than one/ if you want something done right, do it yourself; you can’t teach an old dog new tricks/ it’s never too late to learn; and never sweat the small stuff/ God is in the details (pp. 21-22).” God is in the details. There are no insignificant tasks or people.

In his book *Prayers* Michel Quoist put it this way (p. 23).

The bricklayer laid a brick on the bed of cement.
Then, with a precise stroke of his trowel, spread another layer
And, without a by-your-leave, laid on another brick.
The foundations grew visibly,
The building rose, tall and strong, to shelter men (and women).

I thought, Lord, of that poor brick buried in the darkness at
the base of the big building.
No one sees it, but it accomplishes its task, and the other bricks
need it.
Lord, what difference whether I am on the rooftop or in the
foundations of your building, as long as I stand faithfully
at the right place?

What difference indeed?!