

## “God Of The Sweep”

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Genesis 21:8-13 + Mark 9:33-37 = leadership in God’s family

In backpacking through Philmont Scout Ranch, I discovered there are two kinds of leadership positions on a trek: *point* and *sweep*. Each day on a rotating basis, each youth takes the point position. Point leads by setting direction and pace, carries the maps and the compass. Each youth serves as point sooner or later.



Most people in the world think the *real* leadership position, is *point*. It certainly

is the one the world considers prestigious and the one the world rewards with accolades. Indeed God



does lead as point ~ sometimes. God led the

people out of Egypt, opening the Red Sea, a fiery pillar by night and smoke by day.

Jesus led as point ~ “first fruits from the dead” as Paul proclaims it. Jesus was the prow of the ship



which opened the way through and beyond the grave. Yes, God, our God, leads at point ~ sometimes.

Yet ... there is another way to lead, another way God leads ~ *sweep*. The sweep position is at the rear, not carrying the compass and maps, but carrying instead something just as important for the trek, the medical supplies.

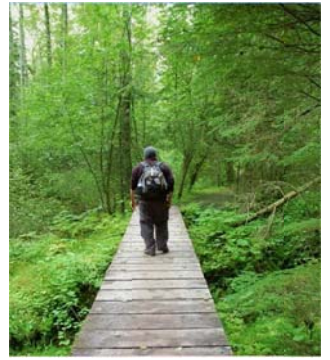


At Philmont, rarely would any of the youths volunteer to lead from behind. It is not considered a position of prestige or leadership. After all,



in a cattle drive the sweep position is the worst, so dirty having to breathe the dust of a thousand hooves. In a parade, the sweep position was literally *sweeping* up after the elephants, horses and sheep. It was miserable and reserved for the ones with the lowest status and least authority.

No surprise in a Philmont trek that a stigma exists. No young scout would ever volunteer for sweep position. Loud protests were registered every time it was suggested sweep be part of the rotation. So it was by default the position for adults. However, those of us of "mature years" know that the job of sweep is as important if not more important than point.



**W**hile point sets the destination, sweep makes sure everyone arrives at the destination *safe* and *together*. It is by no means easy ~ harder in its own way than point. The human tendency is for almost all point leaders to run ahead without looking back and noticing no one is actually following.



There is a natural tendency to think this and life itself is all a race to see which individual can get there first. Point is first across the line and sweep is last, but sweep is not the loser. When all arrive together, safe, healthy, sound everybody wins!



In God's family it is very much like in the family movie, *Lilo and Stitch*, in the unforgettable line: *"family means no one gets left behind."*

Our God, the God we see throughout Scripture, is God of the sweep making sure no one gets left behind, no one is forgotten.



**S**weep is therefore a different kind of leadership ~ encouraging leadership, empowering leadership ~ Jesus describes this leadership well on his part when he says:



**"How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings,"** [Luke 13.34]

Servant leadership ~ the kind of leadership Jesus prescribes for his followers:

**"Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."**

The traditional position of the server is at the back, end of the line, back of the bus. In a parade sweeping up after the elephants and horses.





**Y**et, in the Bible God leads over and over as sweep. God acted as sweep when God promised a childless, overage couple Abram and Sarai that they would become progenitors of a great nation. God acted as sweep when caring for the slave girl Hagar and her son Ishmael, saving them in the wilderness. God led as sweep when carrying the slave people Israel out of Egypt.



When Israel demanded a leader, God gave them as their greatest king a lowly and humble shepherd ~ showing them the kind of leader God desires ~ explaining by example the selfless leader God wants for us as well ~ selfless. When the leaders of Israel proved to be so much less than what God wanted for the

people, God spoke thru the prophet Isaiah with a clear description of the leader God intends:

**“[H]e was wounded for our transgressions,  
crushed for our iniquities;  
upon him was the punishment that made us whole,  
and by his bruises we are healed.” [Isaiah 53.5]**

After exile from that green and fertile land, God acted as sweep in bringing Israel back home.



When all else failed, God sent the only begotten to demonstrate what God's intention was for real leadership.

Then most graphically, Jesus demonstrated it when he submitted to crucifixion and death on the cross.



**G**od, our God is God of the sweep, a servant leader, making sure no one gets left behind, no one is forgotten. The ultimate example of servant leadership, of being sweep is Jesus. And our ultimate form of servant leadership, sweep position, is taking up the believer's cross and following Jesus, of undertaking suffering to relieve the suffering of others, of losing life to save life.



We know this runs up hard against our American culture of rugged individualism ~ all wanting to be point, not caring if anyone is following and doing it all on our own. Leadership in God's family is diametrically opposed to worldly expectations of leadership. We already know that within God's family, the respected leadership is not the same as in the world.



**P**oint leadership is certainly one of God's gifts and is needed on occasion in God's community. Yet the ego that often comes with it is not needed. Susan once was in a choral group with a prima donna tenor. In one performance he walked on the stage late throwing the whole performance off and the group scrambling to adjust.



Point leadership if pushed to the extreme gives us a Gordon Gekko, a "greed is good" leader whose all-consuming soul is bent on sacrificing others in order to line one's own nest.

Sweep leadership if pushed to the extreme gives us instead Jesus who sacrificed himself in order to open the gates of death. This is the kind of leader Jesus was. This is the kind of leader Jesus desires for his followers. This is the leadership Jesus wants us to search for in God's beloved community.

**I**f you haven't figured it out yet, leadership in Christ's community is different from what the world honors in its leaders. The family of Jesus is not just another social club. Yes, the world extolls point leaders putting them on pedestals ~ the world likes winners.



But the community of the Risen LORD extolls the servant leaders, the sweep servants. In the eyes of the world, Jesus is a loser. In the words of the bluesy song "*Some Career*" from a long-forgotten musical: "*He was a flop at thirty three.*" But the song concludes that Jesus is the "*the one successful man upon the earth.*"<sup>1</sup>



A few Sundays ago, we had leadership choices to make when we elected elders and deacons to serve here at GPC. Your Nominating Committee was very mindful of Jesus' mandate:

**“Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all,”** and your Committee worked long and hard to identify those persons who were servant leaders, sweep leaders.

Yes, the kind of leaders Jesus calls us to be: leaders from behind who make sure everyone arrives at the destination *safe* and *together*; no one left behind, no one forgotten; who will lay down life for sisters and brothers; who serve neighbor as self; who seek justice and peace with grace and love; who serve with compassion for the outsider, the other. Jesus expects nothing less, yet he has also given us all the gifts and graces needed to fulfill true leadership.



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<sup>1</sup> From the song “Some Career” ~ lyrics by Helen Kromer and music by Frederick Silver from the musical *For Heaven’s Sake!*