

Ready, set, speak!

By [Adam J. Copeland](#)

May 25, 2012

It was late and one chair sat empty when I got an uneasy feeling in my stomach. Looking at the panelists seated up front, I knew the speaker from the Jewish tradition, the Islamist, and the Buddhist were present. By process of elimination, I figured the other two occupying their chairs were the Hindu and Baha'i speakers. Which left a lone seat empty for the Christian.

I had planned on attending the Interfaith Panel Discussion on Forgiveness hosted by Fargo's Center for Interfaith Projects as a member of the audience seated comfortably at the back of the room. I had even considered sneaking out early. But, there it was: an empty chair up front. As the organizer of the event walked slowly towards me and asked, kindly and without presumption, if I'd jump in as the voice from the Christian tradition, I knew I'd say "yes." (It's sort of my job, after all.) The tougher question — the much tougher question — was what I'd say at the microphone when it came my time to present a few minutes later. What is the Christian perspective on forgiveness? How could one best explain it in an interfaith setting? No time to think.

As I frantically scribbled notes on the back of my program (while trying simultaneously to listen to the first presentations) I was not in the mood to analyze my approach to the task. In the moment, I found myself longing for my quiet office filled with textbooks and Bibles, historical creeds and spiritual writings. I wanted Google books, a concordance, and theological dictionary all at my fingertips. But I only had a half sheet of blank paper, my iPhone, and 20 minutes (half listening to the other speakers) before needing to present something halfway respectable to a crowd of curious guests.

Now looking back, I'm not surprised what sources came to mind. In fact, I shouldn't have worried at all: **my faith life and theological education had prepared me perfectly, even if I didn't realize it at the time.**

First, I called upon my network of colleagues through Twitter and Facebook. I sent a quick tweet and updated my Facebook status asking how other people might explain forgiveness from a Christian perspective with an interfaith panel in mind. The responses — which came in quickly — were indeed very helpful. In fact, I even quoted one (to much laughter and surprise of the audience) during the Q & A portion of the event. This use of social networking reminds me just how powerful these tools can be when used for ministry.

Second, my mind went to several semesters of theology lectures I enjoyed in seminary. Yes, I thought of theories of atonement and some facts I memorized for ordination exams, but mostly I considered the larger framework of the courses. Why did we talk about atonement and grace? Sin. Where does sanctification fit? With a discussion of justification. As silly as it sounds, thinking of the syllabus for Theology I and II was incredibly helpful in formulating my remarks.

Third, scripture came to mind, of course. But interestingly, I found my mind rarely searches scripture for big themes such as “forgiveness,” and never to explain concepts in interfaith settings. In day to day Christian life, I guess I rarely take those meta questions to my Bible. The scripture thoughts quickly led me to liturgy, though, to the pieces of services I had memorized and which come from scripture: “...we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves.” “Since God has forgiven us, let us forgive one another. Share signs of peace...” “Nothing can separate you from the love of God...” “Who is in a position to condemn? Only Christ, and Christ...in Jesus Christ, you are forgiven.” “...Forgive us our debts, and we forgive our debtors.”

Finally, the rumination on scripture which led me to memorized liturgy reflecting scripture led me to consider the sacraments. So I spoke about how forgiveness is at the heart of both Baptism and Eucharist. It’s in that sign of the cross on our foreheads, and it’s baked into the bread we share at the table.

Now, do know: were I to speak again it would sound significantly different. Obviously, I’d be much more prepared (and probably sweating less profusely). My transitions would be smoother. I’d use more narrative and a single clear lens to get at the huge topic of forgiveness. In short: it’d be much better.

But, that said, if something like this does happen again, I won’t panic. After all, I know my Bible, have a Christian education, and each Sunday we say — and enact — what we believe in the liturgy. Plus...there’s always Twitter.

Originally posted at [A Wee Blether](#)