

MARCH 4

It is a sad fact that churches feel the need to post signs ALL ARE WELCOME. Why should we need to advertise that fact?

Jesus lived his entire ministry among strangers—people outside the dominant social and religious norms of his day. He spent his time with all the wrong people—sinners, tax collectors, lepers, women, smelly fishermen and shepherds, and foreigners. Yet even the disciples had to ask, “When was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you?”

If we are honest with ourselves, the church has been, and remains in some cases, one of the least welcoming places we inhabit. The saying has long been true that the most segregated hour of the week is Sunday morning. Our signs say ALL ARE WELCOME, but our behavior often says STRANGER DANGER.

“Not us,” you say. “See our sign!” But there are a lot of “ifs” associated with being fully accepted into church communities. You are welcome *if* you are the right color, *if* you speak the right language, *if* you wear the right clothing and smell good, *if* you love the same people we love. These ifs are so deeply ingrained in our various cultures that we may be largely unaware that we communicate them. But the stranger notices our discomfort—diverted eyes, purses tucked closer to the body, impenetrable circles of conversation at coffee hour.

It is difficult and often painful work to be radically honest with ourselves, to see that our actions do not always match our

intent. Signs that say ALL ARE WELCOME are a good first step in welcoming the stranger. Our behaviors will change as we take time to think and pray about how we do and do not welcome strangers into our lives, at church, and in other settings.

How can we face the limits of our experience and understanding in ways that challenge our fears and transform our world views? How can we practice the radical welcome Jesus teaches us?

—LEE ANNE REAT