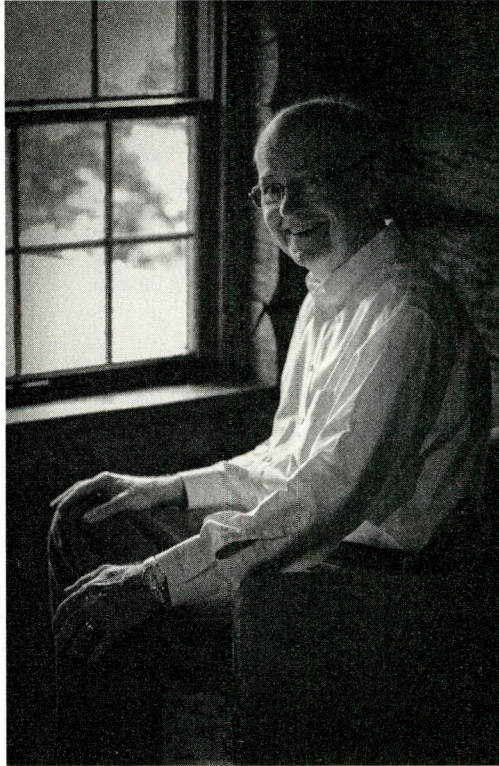


## *Erskine Clarke as Colleague, Pastor, Neighbor, Father, and Parishioner*

Mark Ramsey, Charlottesville, Virginia  
Ted Wardlaw, Austin, Texas



We are pretty sure that Erskine, as Editor and Publisher of *Journal for Preachers*, would not have approved this article. We can hear him saying, “this is the Advent issue and preachers need inspiration and guidance for their Advent sermons” (i.e. “get on with it!”).

But we are going to take a moment of privilege, as the new Publisher and Editor of *JP* (and incidentally, as two pastors who both had the honor of having Erskine in congregations we served), to honor Erskine Clarke and the gift he has given to preachers for over 45 years through *Journal for Preachers*.

You will find other references to Erskine’s roles and gifts throughout this issue, but here we want to focus on what it was like to have Erskine as a colleague, pastor, neighbor, father, and

parishioner. We offer these brief glimpses from those who knew Erskine in those roles.

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*Lizzie Rogers and Legare Kohler are Erskine and Nan’s daughters. Lizzie remembers the earliest days of JP.*

When my dad started *Journal for Preachers* in the late 1970’s, I was seven years old. At the outset, my sister Legare and I were “recruited” by my dad to help. We would have to help lick the envelopes and stamps to send out the *JP*. After some time having to do it that way, Legare and I were so excited when he bought this rolling thing with water that we could use instead!

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*Gary Charles served as pastor at Central Presbyterian Church in Atlanta when Erskine and his family were there.*

Fortunately, I think of Erskine less as a former parishioner and more as a mentor, a person with a passion for social justice, a scholar, and a friend. Long before I ever met Erskine Clarke, I was an avid reader of *Journal for Preachers*. During my tenure at Central, Erskine published a book, *Dwelling Place: A Plantation Epic*, that transformed my understanding of the history of white privilege, Southern theological dead-ends in defense of slavery, and the treacherous longitudinal stain on the American character by its complicity in enslaving people.

Pastors can count themselves blessed when they serve congregations with faithful and fruitful Christians of the likes of Erskine Clarke. This pastor will forever be in his debt.

— Gary Charles, Cove Presbyterian Church, Covesville, Virginia

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*Jim Richardson has been a colleague and friend of Erskine's through the years.*

Over the many, many years that I have known Erskine Clarke, I have been richly blessed by his scholarship and many writings, not only his books but also his gifts through *Journal for Preachers*. My personal life as well as my years of ministry through the church have been broadened as well as enlightened by Professor Erskine Clarke, and I thank God for him and his many gifts. But as important as these words are, I want also to highlight his thoughtfulness and kindness to other people. He and his wife Nan exhibit a caring nature for other people, and I am praying that God will help me (and you) to follow in their lifestyle.

— Jim Richardson, Pastor Emeritus, Fort Hill PCUSA, Clemson, South Carolina

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*Scott Huie's father, Wade Huie, taught homiletics at Columbia and was a long term faculty member with Erskine, and the two families were neighbors.*

Karl Barth may have said that the preacher needs a Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. What Barth left out as a third essential is a *Journal for Preachers* in his or her back pocket! Kudos to Erskine for such a long and distinguished career in publishing the *Journal for Preachers*, which has been an indispensable resource for me in my nearly 30 years of ordained ministry. The *Journal* has helped me immensely in those ongoing challenges to keep weekly preaching faithful and fresh. In this era of fake news and Kardashian headlines, Erskine is the anti-Kardashian: understated, genuine, authentic, with a wry sense of humor to boot. He operates without a lot of flash and panache but overflowing

with substance and depth. Along with Nan, Erskine has been a dear family friend for decades. His contributions to the greater church will be sorely missed by me and countless others. God speed, dear friend.

— *Scott Huie, Bellevue Presbyterian Church, Nashville, Tennessee*

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*Heather Gast, Rebecca Gurney, and Kristy Farber all served with Mark Ramsey in Asheville, North Carolina, when Erskine and Nan had moved to Montreat.*

Erskine is a man of few words, but he offers them with tremendous consideration and kindness. I worked as the Children and Family Ministries Coordinator for nine years at a church that Erskine attended. Many members of the church, like Erskine, were accomplished religious scholars or ordained. At times I found this intimidating as a lay person, but Erskine had a gift for well-timed words of encouragement and support. On many occasions, Erskine would seek me out after church with specific praise that demonstrated how attentive he had been to my presentation to the children, and he would thank me for my contributions to the worship service and to the community. Advice or compliments from Erskine meant so much because they were measured to convey the most love and respect in so few words. He never failed to make me feel heard, seen, and valued.

— *Heather Gast, Elementary School Teacher, Weaverville, North Carolina*

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Serving a church with Erskine Clark in the congregation should scare the pants off anybody. Whatever you think you know, Erskine knows it ten times better, backwards and forwards. What's more he would never compromise his intellectual or theological integrity to make you feel better about an idea that missed the mark or a sermon that wasn't quite right—I could always tell, by his five carefully chosen words, if the preaching wasn't up to snuff that day. But the great gift Erskine gives to his community and his friends is that he is as kind as he is brilliant, and he has wisdom and generosity to match his integrity. Erskine interprets the world and everyone he encounters with a thoughtful charity, evident to anyone who spots the twinkle in his eye or finds themselves on the receiving end of his gracious encouragement. I left every conversation I had with Erskine sharpened, but also well-loved. I am grateful for the times I sat at Erskine and Nan's table, enjoying a wonderful meal and rich conversation, one of innumerable students, pastors, and friends fortunate enough to have been invited into their home and into their lives.

— *Rebecca Gurney, Reems Creek-Beech Presbyterian Church, Weaverville, North Carolina*

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Erskine Clarke is the type of church member who makes a congregation healthier and more faithful. I was a newly ordained minister when Erskine and I met, and I remember the ways he and his wife welcomed me to this incredible congregation.

As his pastor, I experienced his deep wisdom, his overflowing love of worship, and, in all things, his remarkably generous spirit. I experienced his generosity in traditional ways, as he and Nan hosted meals or sought to meet tangible needs in the community. I also experienced Erskine as being incredibly generous with his time and his expertise. There were a handful of times my colleagues and I would email Erskine on a Wednesday with a three-sentence question, wondering if he could give us some background or context for the church in history, and he consistently responded with so much care and detail. I loved that he was willing to teach at a Confirmation Class, talking in depth with middle school students about the history of the church in the United States. Erskine was willing to help lead hard conversation around church discipline and polity. Every day it was clear that he cared about both his own local congregation and God's church in the world.

— *Kristy Farber, Mercer Island Presbyterian Church, Mercer Island, Washington*

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*A few years ago, Erskine answered a call to serve a small church in rural South Carolina as their interim pastor. One of the members of that church remembers:*

By the grace of God, Erskine Clarke heard the call to come be our minister at Indiantown Presbyterian Church. He came bringing warmth, love, and enthusiasm for the people of this old farming community and its church. He and Nan gave new life to our manse, inviting in church family and community members, and bringing in long-time friends, as well as their own family, to visit for the weekends. He visited in our homes and dropped by to see neighbors, always with lively and interesting conversation. We enjoyed wonderful meals and gatherings in our fellowship hall, including a dinner to honor our preschool teachers and their years of service to that mission project.

At Sunday worship, early on, he reminded us that all country roads lead to home and that Indiantown Presbyterian Church has been a homeplace nurturing faith, hope, and love for generations. He encouraged us to look forward and see a new future for our church. One grounded in love. Then, in the Spring, Erskine gave us a view of our strong history when he led us on a Presbyterian Heritage tour of churches established along the Black River. We visited Salem-Black River, Goodwill, and concluded with a gathering for dinner with members of Mt. Zion Presbyterian Church. That trip was a highlight of Erskine's time as our pastor and a most excellent view for Indiantown with direct connections through our forefathers to two of those churches. He could not have served us and loved us better!

— *Joyce Braxton, Indiantown Presbyterian Church, Hemingway, South Carolina*

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*Mary Katherine Robinson serves as pastor at Erskine and Nan's current congregation.*

Erskine waits patiently at the back of the line in the narthex, every single Sunday, to share an affirmation, a word of appreciation, and on rare occasions, I will hear him say, "that's one I want for the *JP*!" As he moves forward to speak, hope dances through his twinkling brown eyes as he lifts his precocious greying eyebrows. The moment I hear his captivating drawl, I stop whatever I'm doing and pay attention. I know he has been particularly touched when I see a tear travel down his boyish button nose. If I had known 28 years ago, when I was a student of Erskine's at CTS, that I would presently be preaching to him most every single Sunday, I would have spent more time in seminary avidly reading the pages of wisdom in the *JP*!

Finding the words to express how much Erskine has meant to me and to my development as a preacher and pastor, but more importantly as a human being, is difficult indeed. In his classroom, he showed me that the sins of my white southern world would not and could not hold me captive in all their complexity and contradictions. Indeed, there is tremendous hope and irresistible grace in our affections, our hearts, turning to God by continually being reformed. As much as his humility and wisdom has inspired his colleagues and readers of the *JP* for decades, it is his goodness of heart that I will miss most in these pages. Every year I become more aware of what a gift Erskine's witness, his work, and his love have made in our world. His presence at Black Mountain Presbyterian is one I depend on daily.

— *Mary Katherine Robinson, Black Mountain Presbyterian Church, Black Mountain, North Carolina*

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*Ted Wardlaw and Mark Ramsey are, respectively, the new editor and publisher of JP and share the experience of serving as pastor to Erskine and Nan Clarke.*

It was my pleasure, while serving as pastor of Central Presbyterian Church in Atlanta for close to twelve years, to be one of Erskine and Nan Clarke's pastors. (Across those years, Agnes Norfleet, Kim Clayton, and Caroline Kelly served Central as Associate Pastors.) Loaded with over fifty retired pastors, pastoral counselors, or seminary professors at both Columbia Seminary and Candler School of Theology, Central was blessed with an added dose of rich theological and ecclesiological accents. Erskine and Nan were both servants and leaders. They were supportive of their pastors, for sure, and they were also model parishioners. Nan sang in the church's glorious choir, Erskine was particularly active in ministries with the homeless, and both were the sorts of people who were there whenever the doors were open. Neither of them expected special treatment due to their stature in the church and city; instead they practiced genuine humility. There were times when the work was more difficult than usual, and I would experience either an empathic word on Sunday at the door

in the narthex or a visit in my study. Always, always, it was that kind demeanor and that soft empathic word that I most remembered on those occasions. Erskine's pastoral heart—his greatest strength, that thing that tempered every other theological asset—always came through. It was that beautiful heart that always defined him, and still does.

— Ted Wardlaw

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Just out of seminary in the mid-1980's, serving as an associate pastor in a D.C. area congregation, I received a mailing for *Journal for Preachers*. Among the authors listed were former professors and others whom I read regularly, and the price was right (seriously, how did Erskine publish *JP* for four decades plus at such modest rates?), so I subscribed. Over the years, many other preaching resources have come and gone – either because the publishers stopped producing them, or I stopped reading them—but *JP* has been a constant companion for almost 40 years now. Then in 2006 I moved to a congregation in Asheville, North Carolina. On my first Sunday, a man came through the line after worship and introduced himself as Erskine Clarke. *Erskine Clarke?* The name sounded familiar, but I couldn't place it...until I realized it was the name I had seen at the top of the *JP* masthead all those years. That Erskine followed his introduction with an insightful and appreciative comment on the content and structure of my sermon should have provided a hint to who he was, and to what it was going to be like having him sitting in the pews each Sunday. Over the next nine remarkable years, I found in Erskine a friend, a colleague, a deep thinker, a person of values about faith and culture, a keen observer of what was happening in and out of the church, a person of strong ecclesiology and gentle humor. But how I most remember Erskine in those years is as a pastor. A keen listener, a direct questioner, and a consistent messenger of God's grace.

When *JP* was just in its first years, Frederick Buechner wrote his "spiritual autobiography," in which he tells of his conversion, listening to a sermon by George Buttrick in which Buttrick preached that "Jesus is crowned king with...great laughter." Something in that phrase caught Buechner in God's grace, and he never looked back. Years later, someone sent Buechner Buttrick's manuscript of that sermon, and the words *great laughter* do not appear. Buttrick had ad-libbed it. To which Buechner observed: "On such thin threads can hang the destiny of any of us." In some ways, that is how I feel about having casually answered that *JP* subscription mailer all those years ago. What a landscape – homiletically and personally – did that open for my soul, in so many ways that I can only begin to express thank you, Erskine.

— Mark Ramsey