

“God is for real, man!”

That was the title of Carl’s first book, published in 1966. Reviewers described the book as stories and passages from the Bible translated by street kids – juvenile delinquents with whom Carl worked – into their own street-smart language. For instance, the opening line of the 23rd Psalm is translated this way:

The Lord is like my Probation Officer,
He will help me,
He tries to help me make it every day.
He makes me play it cool
And feel good inside me.

Remember now, this is 1966. The street version of the Ten Commandments starts like this:

“You shall have no other gods before me” means:
God’s the leader – nobody, but nobody, gets in the way.
This is the top. He is Mr. Big – real big.

Well, *God is for Real, Man* was a best seller. More than a million copies were sold. And young people loved it. All over the country, church youth groups used these new slang-laden translations in bible studies, discussion groups and sometimes, even in the regular Sunday worship services, much to the chagrin of their straight-laced parents. For young people of the time, Carl’s book brought God out of the stale world of religion and into the real world of the day. *God is for Real, Man* made God real to a whole generation.

And I should know, because I was one of the kids back in 1966 who bought it – and through Carl Burke’s book, God became more real to me.

As I’ve been reflecting these past few days upon Carl’s life and ministry, it occurs to me that *God is for real, man!* is more than just a book title. It is a phrase that very beautifully describes Carl’s life. Through Carl, God was made real to countless people, including those of us gathered here today. And Carl’s gift of sharing that real-ness of God with others comes out of 93-years of experience with the reality of God’s love and mercy in his own life.

Carl Francis Burke was born in Amesbury, Massachusetts on December 12, 1917. His parents were Lillian Mae and Jack Burke, and Carl grew up with two brothers – Arthur and John (who some of the family call “Mike”) – and a sister, Marjorie. They say that Carl was a fun-loving kid, capable of some mischief like the time he and Arthur pulled a rope through a fence and tied it to the bumper of a police car. His mischievous nature must have become rather legendary because – many years later - when Carl was commuting by train to seminary in Boston, he bumped into one of his grade school teachers. She asked him what he was doing with his life and he told her he was going to seminary to become a minister. She gasped and blurted out, “Not you!”

But as mischievous as Carl may have been as a boy, he was capable also of seriousness and responsibility as shown in attaining the rank of Eagle Scout. Those were hard times in many ways, and Carl quit high

school to go to work. But after a time, Carl returned to school to get his G.E.D. and to pursue that other direction just mentioned – an inner calling toward Christian ministry. He enrolled at Providence Bible Institute (which later became Barrington College), but his studies there were interrupted with the start of World War II. Arthur and Mike enlisted in the Navy, and Carl went into the Army where he became an x-ray technician. Carl loved to point out that he actually once gave General Eisenhower an order. Carl said, “Hold still!” for the x-ray. And Ike did! Carl liked that!

Carl participated in the D-Day invasion, coming ashore on D-Day plus 3. He was at the Battle of the Bulge. And one day, the hospital he was working in was attacked and overtaken by the Germans. Carl was captured and taken as a prisoner of war.

Back in the year 2000, a number of us from the Community Church traveled to Germany to see the Oberammergau Passion Play. One of our side trips was to the concentration camp at Dachau, not far from where Carl had been held prisoner. Carl shared with some of us that just being in the general vicinity of where he was held brought back some horrible memories of that time in his life. Most of us can't imagine what it would be like or how we'd get through an experience like that. But if you know Carl, you know that his faith was a crucial part of it. As Carl struggled through this terribly trying time as a prisoner in a far away land, God was for real, man.

After the war, Carl returned to school and there at the Providence Bible Institute met a young woman named Marion Libby. They fell in love, married and – with Carl graduated and serving a small church – started a family. A daughter Lois was born, but died after just 4-days. Later, Joyce was born, and then Susan. And in all these experiences of life – the sorrows and the joys – Carl's God was for real, man.

After graduating from seminary at the Gordon College School of Theology and Missions, Carl accepted a call to a Baptist church in Ticonderoga, NY. And so his ministry began in earnest and Carl took on the vocation of convincing people that God is for real. That message was lived out through Carl's love and devotion to the people he served. He understood people and how difficult life can be. He was a true pastor, shepherding those he served through the hills and valleys of life. And all the while, Carl's own life continued to be tested. Shortly after moving to a new church in Schenectady, NY, his wife Marion was stricken with polio and died. Carl was left alone with two little girls.

Help came from Carl's mother and many others who came alongside. Sometimes when we are going through tragedies we become disappointed because it seems God does not come down from heaven to help. And yet all the while, God is already here, present in the people who draw near with a word, an embrace, an act of loving support. Maybe the silence of heaven is because God is not “up there” after all – but rather because God is for real, man – and right here among us.

And sometimes God plays the role of matchmaker.

Carl went on a retreat held at a Baptist camp. There he met a beautiful young lady named Caroline Burns. They actually knew OF each other through Baptist circles – Caroline worked at the State Baptist Association. But – nothing much happened at that retreat other than the beginning of a friendship.

The next Fall, there was another retreat. Carl attended. So did Caroline. There was a spark! Their first date was on September 30th. They became engaged in November. And on February 18, 1956 Carl Burke and Caroline Burns were married at the Community Church in Garden City. Caroline likes to say that marrying Carl was easy. All she had to do was to change two letters of her last name. But in reality, becoming Mrs. Burke presented some challenges – like suddenly becoming a mother to two little girls, Joyce and Susan. But the kids were excited about having a mom. The first time Carl introduced Caroline to the girls, Joyce ran up to her and said, “Are you gonna be my new mommy?” The only disappointment for Joyce in all this was that – when Carl and Caroline were married - she was not allowed to go on the honeymoon with them. But for a long time afterwards Joyce had the mischievous joy of telling teachers, parishioners and anyone else who would listen that she got to be the Flower Girl at her daddy and mommy’s wedding!

God IS for real, man – and with a real sense of humor!

After the honeymoon it was back to Schenectady, and that’s where Dave was born 15 months later. Then came a move to Buffalo to the Lafayette Street Baptist Church which had a huge building where the Burke kids loved to go to run the long hallways and climb all the way up into the steeple. Buffalo is where the kids grew up. Their dad and mom introduced them to camping, and they have wonderful memories of family camping trips in the Adirondacks. One is of a horrific rainstorm and watching Carl out in the pouring rain, digging a trench around the campsite to try to keep the water away from the tent. Camping is where the kids learned to make s’mores, and to enjoy hiking in the wilderness.

Carl also introduced the kids to ice skating one winter there in Buffalo. They shoveled out the whole backyard at their house and Carl flooded it with water to make an ice rink. And the kids remember seeing their dad out there at night with a hose, pouring on layer after layer of water that would become smooth ice for them to skate on.

Carl enjoyed a special relationship with his kids. On Saturdays he would take one of them and they’d go out to breakfast together. They were allowed to get anything they wanted. And those Saturday breakfast times became sacred moments shared between the children and their dad. Through Carl and Caroline, the Burke children discovered in very special unique ways that God IS for real, man.

Carl’s ministry in Buffalo took him to the Council of Churches where he became Executive Director, and the public voice of the Protestant churches. He became involved in prison ministry and made it possible for Dave to go around telling others that he couldn’t remember a weekend when his father was not in jail. And Carl worked hard at a new passion – writing books. That’s when *God is for Real, Man* was finished and published and became an international bestseller. The family got to travel to Europe. Life was good.

But then Susan became ill with systemic lupus. For three years she and her family battled the illness before she passed away.

Carl decided the family needed some healing and rebuilding time. He resigned from the Council of Churches and accepted a pastorate at the Community Church in Evans, NY. It was there that Carl got

season tickets to the Buffalo Bills games and the family joined all those Bills fans who cheered on the Bills to four consecutive Super Bowl losses. And all the while, Carl became locally famous for what were called his “Buffalo Bills Sermons” where he reassured his congregation, “Don’t worry. I’ll have you there in time for kickoff!”

Evans is where Carl became connected to our Council of Community Churches and his presence in the I.C.C.C. enriched many. That’s why these men have come today to honor Carl and to give thanks to God. They too know that God is for real, man – and have experienced God’s reality through Carl.

From Evans, Carl took a position with the Commission on Religion in Appalachia that was headquartered here in Knoxville. And eventually, that’s what brought Carl and Caroline into retirement here, and the planting of what became an amazing church here in Tellico Village. Many of you are part of that story and I know you cherish that time of your lives.

Our community has been richly blessed by Carl and Caroline Burke. They not only have shared life in all its seasons with us, but have also given us the joy of knowing their children, Joyce and Dave – and their spouses, Jim and Kathy – and they have shared with us the pride they have in their grandchildren: Brian, Kevin, Jackie and Carrie. Knowing how deeply Carl loved his grandchildren, we know that he was only trying to be funny and get a cheap Irish laugh when he used to say, “The most beautiful color in the world is the red of the taillights taking your grandchildren home.”

Carl, of course, had many other clever sayings. He was Irish, after all. On the golf course he would say that you shouldn’t have to take a penalty when you lost your ball because losing your ball is penalty enough. Carl also said that he never swore when frustrated on the golf course, but where he spat, the grass turned brown and died.

And all the preachers here know that Carl would often comment on our sermons by saying, “That was a wonderful sermon. There were so many points where you could have ended – and you missed them all!”

I know that I am in violation of that saying today, but frankly, I don’t care. Sometimes you just have to let the story tell itself, and Carl’s story deserves telling. It is one of those truly meaningful chapters that flow out of the Greatest Story Ever Told – about a loving God who came down out of heaven and put on human flesh – who walks with us in times of tragedy and triumph, all the times that human beings face. It is the story about the God who stakes out a place among us, and loves us with all he has in the midst of life’s realities. It is the story about the God who is with us in life and in death – and promises to bring us into eternal life beyond death.

It is the story of a God who is for real, man.

Today - 45 years after Carl’s book hit the shelves in 1966 – it would perhaps be more politically correct to make the title more gender inclusive by calling it “God is for real, y’all” – or something like that. Times have changed.

But through all the changing times of life – from childhood to now – from times of war to times of peace and back again – from times of gain to times of loss – from times of joy to times of mourning – one thing remains unchanging and unchangeable.

God IS for real.

We know that to be true.

Because God has been made real to us – in so many ways - through the life of Carl Francis Burke.

Thanks and glory be to God.