

Secret passage: "The craziest thing you've done here yet"

by [Lillian Daniel](#) in the [January 9, 2007](#) issue

In the minutes before the wedding ceremony, I wait downstairs in Pilgrim Hall with the groom and the groomsmen. Upstairs the sanctuary is lovely, with freshly vacuumed carpeting and wedding flowers that are a cut above the usual Sunday morning carnation extravaganza. But down where I wait with the men, it is the usual church fellowship hall, with its folding metal chairs, chipped Formica tables and years of cookie crumbs and juice ground into the rug.

"We used to run around this place like crazy," the groom tells me, recalling his upbringing in the church. "We'd stay down here with our sleeping bags for youth fellowship lock-ins. But we'd run around all night, sliding on the rails, playing games. We never slept."

It is an irony for this young man and others like him that in the minutes before their elegant weddings they wait downstairs in Pilgrim Hall, where over the years they sprinkled glitter on glue-dripping felt banners, ate chicken casserole, drowned their Yule logs in showers of spray-on snow and played dodge ball late into the night.

They reminisce, "We used to run wild here," as if confessing a secret that I as pastor would not know. Yet the old church hall reflects, in its shabbiness, a wild variety of activities of a holy space well used. It is a shelter for the homeless, a banquet hall for a Hawaiian dinner, an indoor playground whose ramp to assist the handicapped seems to have been constructed so that packs of children could run down the slope and swing their little bodies over the rail like gymnasts.

"Kids, get off that thing!" the youth fellowship leader shouts. "You cannot run wild in here!" But they can, they do and they always have.

The groom pulls the best man aside. "Sometimes we just took off exploring into this creepy old secret passageway in the back of the church." His look is wistful as he tries to convey to his buddy, to me and perhaps to himself that he has not always

been tuxedo-clad husband material, a man about to make promises for an adult lifetime. He was once a raggedy rebellious teen tearing around the church and searching for secret hideaways.

"You may not know about that secret passage," he tells me, the minister. "Has anyone ever shown it to you?"

"We're going to use it right now," I say. "It gets us from Pilgrim Hall to the door that opens out to the front of the church."

And so he joins those grooms who have taken the long walk into the sanctuary through a short, dark passage in which they once played chase and other games and into which they perhaps even lured a girl so they could steal a kiss.

We walk up some old stairs and into the passageway that takes us past the back of the organ and around some Christmas pageant scenery. There we wait behind a thick wooden door and peer out through a peephole, a little curved glass eyeball, at the faces of the people in the pews. We check to see if the doors behind them have been thrown open to reveal a flower girl, a bridesmaid or the bride.

The groom notices that the view through the peephole is distorted: straight angles are curved, familiar faces are blurry, and the world outside that door looks like a twisted wonderland. It may be as clear a view of the future as any of us can hope to get.

Often the wedding scripture comes from Paul's famous first letter to the Corinthians. Its words strike couples as fresh and ministers as overdone—words about love being patient, kind and everything but blind. The clergy must explain that these words were not written for couples or for romance, but were delivered to the larger body of Christ.

Still today everyone hears, "Love does not insist on its own way" as a piece of good advice for newlyweds, along with "Never go to bed angry" and "Don't forget to say 'I love you' every day." Couples seize upon 1 Corinthians 13 as a rare practical word from that relentlessly impractical book. "We like this reading," the couples tell me. "It makes sense."

But marriage makes so little sense. The actions that take place at the front of the sanctuary will be as mysterious as the travels through the secret passageways of

youth fellowship. Amid the clanging cymbals and gongs of any marriage, love jumps out unearned, illogical and miraculous. In marriage, we promise to love when it makes no sense, just as Christ has loved us when it made no sense.

The groom sees his mother seated. He thinks he observes a flash of white at the back of the church, the fluffing of a dress—a hint that the woman he plans to spend his life with is hidden but waiting there as he waits. He presses his hands against the passageway door and leans forward, putting his eyeball up to the peephole for as clear a view of his future as he can get from here. “For now we see through a glass darkly, but then we will see face to face.”

“The youth fellowship, the overnight lock-ins? Do you still have those?” he asks me, pensively. “Do the kids still run wild and do crazy things all over the church?”

“They sure do,” I say. “But this may be the craziest thing you’ve done here yet.”

The groom steps back from the door. He breathes in and stands up straight. Adjusting the flower in his lapel one last time, he pulls open the old door and prepares to meet his bride. With one foot in the old secret passageway and another stepping out into the church, he freezes, as if something has just occurred to him. Then he moves forward: his great adventures are not behind him but out in front.