

Jane Stanford – A Life of Spirituality and Suffering

Lives of many people of great faith are also intertwined with great suffering. People such as Gandhi, Mother Teresa, and Martin Luther King have had a lasting impact by examples of their lives of faith and of suffering for a great cause. One such example is that of Jane Stanford, mother of the child “Leland Stanford Junior”, for which the University of the same name is established as his memorial. I would like to describe two events of great suffering in Jane Stanford’s life and her own faith in her own words or what she got engraved.

Jane Stanford had her only child born when she was 39 years old. The child died at age 15 from typhoid fever. She and her husband co-founded the university in his memory the following year and it opened six years later in 1891. Mrs, Stanford prepared an address for the opening, which was not given. Her prepared address speaks of her sorrow turning into the joy of co-founding the university as follows:

“It was born in sorrow but has now become a great joy to our hearts.”

The following speaks of her great faith:

“We fully recognize our own weakness and our inability to accomplish anything by ourselves. We are not deserving of praise for what we have done; we are merely following out a great plan that was conceived by one far greater than ourselves, our Heavenly Father, and we are but lowly instruments in His loving hands.”

After the university opened, her husband died within two years, leaving her widowed and solely in-charge of the university, as surviving co-founder. In his memory, she established Stanford Memorial Church and said, “While my whole heart is in the University, my soul is in that church”. The church has many inscriptions engraved into its walls. Part of one of the inscriptions reads “Let us never be sad, save at having offended God.”

In my view, Jane Stanford’s life is a testament to faith’s ability to overcome tremendous sorrow such as her losing closest loved ones. Such sorrow can be turned into spiritual mission and even joy with origin in faith.